

A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS, 192

*Bratva
Boss's
Babysitter*

AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR
FLORA FERRARI

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BRATVA BOSS'S BABYSITTER

AN OLDER MAN YOUNGER WOMAN ROMANCE

A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS, 192

FLORA FERRARI

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

BRATVA BOSS'S BABYSITTER

Erik Godunov is a man to be feared. Six foot seven and built like a dominating bear, with steel colored hair and eyes that pierce, I should be terrified of him.

He's a Bratva boss, a man used to getting what he wants. And what he needs from me is to be a nanny for his ten year old niece, Kat. She's an orphan after her mother died, and I relate to that, big time. I'm an orphan too, just an inexperienced nineteen year old who should just keep her head down and get on with her work.

But when I see this possessive forty-three year old giant bear of a man, I feel something flaring inside myself. It's silly, it's crazy, he'd never want me ... Or would he? Maybe I have something this absolute savage of a man needs. Maybe, just maybe, I can be more than the babysitter for the Bratva boss.

But even if that's the case, he doesn't know about my past. I've lived on the streets and some pretty crazy stuff has happened to me. Not to mention that my parents were junkies and I might have a stalker out there, looking for me, always looking for me. Am I really the sort of woman a man like Erik would claim?

My passion is painting, but I'm not sure I can paint any sort of reason into my mind when this dominant alpha tells me I'm his, and his alone. He'll kill anybody who touches me. I belong to him. And I'm going to give him children.

Is it a trick? Is it real? Can I trust this feeling inside of me, this new warmth, this feeling of belonging? The more time I spend in his mansion with Kat, the funniest, most endearing

little girl in the world, and Bullet, the most playful, loyal Great Dane in the world, the more I feel like I belong.

Can I be the Bratva queen? Or is something going to go terribly wrong?

**Bratva Boss's Babysitter is an insta-everything standalone instalove romance with a HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger.*

NEWSLETTER

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CHAPTER ONE

E_{rik}

I sit in my garden with Igor, the sun blazing as he leans back in his seat and sips his glass of whiskey. Igor, my second in command, is a tall, thin man with a sharp nose and an aura I know can make some people uneasy.

That's what makes him so useful.

Some have nicknamed him *Ghoul*, for his vampire like presence, the way he will stare silently at you as though wondering if killing you will work into his schedule.

That's all reputation, and in reality he's a decent man, smiling this sunny morning as he sets the glass down.

"I'm telling you, boss," he says. "She's the right one for the job. She *needs* this job, bad. She's an orphan and she'll know not to snoop. She's too desperate to do anything stupid."

I move my finger around the edge of my glass of orange juice, glancing into the deeper grounds of the garden.

My estate is large with ample room for Katelyn, my ten year old niece, to roam. The fences are high and guarded day and night, and yet I still feel a pang as I watch the small girl leaping around near the fountain.

Her mother – my younger sister – died senselessly, blamelessly, in a car crash.

There's no one to blame and on whom I can take vengeance. It's just *one of those things*. That was several months ago now and I'm stunned by Kat's resilience.

Bullet, my Great Dane, lopes beside her, a giant beast of a dog with a big sloppy grin and dark white black coloring, one eye patched white, the other dark.

"It's getting difficult to take care of her," I admit. "A child needs a woman. A man alone can only do so much."

Igor grins and knocks back the rest of his drink.

"You know, Erik, there's some in this modern society who might call you a sexist pig for saying something like that."

"It's a fact," I say with a shrug. "A child needs a mother, or at least a babysitter who can somewhat fulfill that role. Women are more maternal than men."

Igor chuckles and shakes his head. "Not saying I disagree with you. Just saying there are some who'd call you one old fashioned bastard."

"Then I'm old fashioned," I growl. "Maybe I'm the sort of man who wants to ..."

I trail off, leaning back, letting my passion deflate before I display it to one of my men.

I'm the sort of man who wants to claim a woman. But I'll never find her.

"Tell me more about this girl."

Igor nods, used to my habit of suddenly changing the subject. It's one of the things I like about him.

"Her name is Erin Woods and, like I said, she's an orphan. She's nineteen years old and currently living rough, flitting between halfway houses, churches, anywhere she can get a bed and a meal. But as far as I can tell, the streets haven't turned her cruel. She really is perfect."

"And you've vetted her?"

"Yep," he says. "No ties to any criminal organization that we can find. And you know we'd find it."

"You always do thorough work," I agree. "And Kat does need a babysitter or someone. I can't keep doing this alone."

"What, uncle?" Kat says, skipping over, Bullet loping at her side, almost as tall as the girl while laying there on the ground at her feet.

Kat is so much like my sister, with her freckled pale cheeks and her long brown hair worn in a snake like braid over her shoulder. She has the same energy, too, like she's always on the verge of breaking into a run.

"I'm not a *baby*, uncle," she goes on.

"It's rude to eavesdrop, young lady," I tell her, but I can't help but smirk.

She idly strokes Bullet behind the ears and the loyal dog just pants beside her.

"Can I take him inside, uncle?" she asks. "It's getting hot out here. On the internet it says if it gets hotter than

seventy degrees it can be bad, and especially for a big doggie like Bullet."

"Of course, Kat," I say. "Take him to his room and feed him, if you feel up to it."

"Can I?" she beams. "Really?"

I nod. "Do you remember how to measure it?"

"Uh, *yeah*," she laughs, still stroking Bullet behind the ears.

She stomps off, but Bullet stays sitting there, watching me with his intelligent brown eyes. Kat pokes her head out of the back door.

"Bullet, here boy."

I stand and stroll over to him, giving the nape of his neck a soft brush with my knuckles.

"It's okay," I tell him. "Go inside."

He makes a soft groaning noise of assent and then slinks inside, stopping to give me a short nod before disappearing into the house. I return to my chair and lean back.

"I have business all day today," I muse. "And it's becoming untenable to either keep her here or leave her in the care of the maids and my guards. She is safe, of course. But not *cared for*, exactly."

"So you want me to bring the girl, boss?"

I nod. "Yes, bring her here. Today. Kat might think she's twice her age, but she needs a babysitter."

"A nanny, I think they're called," Igor grins. "But same difference, eh?"

I sit in the back of the car as the driver takes us up the long driveway – past the front fountain with the harpies shooting water from their puckered stone mouths – to the large double doored front entrance.

I climb out and walk up the high stone steps, one of my guards opening the door for me. I nod to Andrei and then head inside, clicking my neck from side to side, taking a deep breath and letting the pressure of business recede into the background as I always do upon returning home.

I walk to the east side of the house, the floors carpeted and patterned in the style of a Russian aristocrat's home, as though we've taken the nineteenth century and transported it here, to the east coast of America in the modern world.

When I reach Bullet's room – a large bedroom style space with a dog bed and a feeding area and more toys than I could've dreamed of growing up – I hear two voices raised in frenetic conversation.

I pause, listening.

"And he's a really good dog," Kat is saying, speaking like she's just had a mountain of sugar. "I mean he's the most loyal dog ever, Erin. He's always smiling and he always does the right thing, like if I call him and uncle Erik isn't there, he'll come right away. But if uncle Erik is here he goes to uncle. I think he loves uncle the most. Are you nervous about meeting uncle Erik, Erin? Isn't that funny? *Erin and Erik*. It sounds just the same, right?"

"It sounds very similar," Erin replies.

I stop, my hand on the door handle.

Something thunders in my chest.

I feel like the world is splitting and reshaping in the moment when I listen to her voice, a light, airy, New York accent, the sort of voice people probably hear a thousand times a day in the city.

And yet, and yet ...

It is magic to me.

It pushes deep inside of me and strikes a primal note.

I try to tell myself to calm down, that a voice alone cannot – and should not – provoke this response in me.

But as she goes on I feel something crashing into me, a certainty I have never felt before.

She's the one. I need to put a baby inside this woman. Now. She's mine. I'll kill any man who touches her.

How is this possible just by hearing her voice?

“And yes, I guess I’m a little nervous. This whole place is pretty fricking intimidating, don’t you think?”

“Maybe,” Kat says. “It’s ten times bigger than mommy’s place was. Mommy ... she’s ... do you know what happened to my mommy?”

“Yes, I heard,” Erin whispers. “I’m sorry, Kat.”

“Hey, Bullet ...”

Bullet’s snout pokes around the edge of the door, searching for me.

“Hello, boy,” I say, pushing the door open and kneeling down.

Bullet goes berserk, as he always does when I return after a long day at work. He leaps up and rests his forepaws

against my shoulders, slathering my neck and cheek with his big tongue. I rub him behind the ears and then stand up, taking my silk handkerchief from my suit jacket pocket and wiping myself down.

“He’s excited,” Erin says, standing up from where she and Kat were kneeling next to Bullet’s toy box.

I stare.

I keep staring.

I can’t stop staring at this perfect fucking goddess.

She’s wearing jeans and a simple sweater, chunky black boots that look new, that must be part of the clothes package Igor gave her when she began working earlier today.

And yet her simple clothes can’t hide the absolute flawlessness of her beauty. Forty-three years I have lived on this planet and I’ve never seen a woman like her.

I’ve never imagined a woman like her could exist.

She has curly blonde hair, falling luxuriously down to her shoulders, a thread of it falling across her eyes and partially obscuring them. Her eyes themselves are like glistening green emeralds. Her body is *full*, her body is *thick*, her body is everything I could dream of, curves in all the right places, her legs straining against the fabric of her jeans.

I have to look away from her before my manhood floods.

I can’t let that happen, obviously, not with Kat around.

But when I get this woman alone ...

I’m going to claim her in every way a man can claim a woman.

She's going to understand, without fucking question, that she's mine.

She belongs to me.

And I'm going to pump my hot cock into her, making her wet and slick, and then fire my seed deep inside of her.

She has the look of a woman with an eager, hungry womb.

I know just by looking at her.

And I'll feed it, feed it with every slick, hot drop.

"Um, hello, Mr. Godunov," she says, averting her eyes. "I'm Erin."

"I know," I say, voice coming out as a trembling growl.

You're going to produce milk for my children, Erin, and you're living in a fucking dream world if you don't think I'm having a taste, too. I'm going to suck the milk from your bouncy, voluptuous breasts and then spread it over my cock, making it even wetter, ready to pound into you and make more children.

Jesus Christ, I can't let these thoughts consume me, not here, not in front of my niece.

I turn away, Bullet slinking at my side, and walk through the house.

I emerge into the garden, the setting sun making the sky a purple bruise, and wander right to the end of the garden, through the maze like hedges, emerging near the pond.

I sit down and Bullet sits beside me, patiently, head cocked like he knows something is different.

"Hell, boy," I whisper. "She's the one. She's really the one. I've finally found her."

My queen.

CHAPTER TWO

E_{rin}

The next morning, I wake early and make Kat breakfast, stunned at the size and at how well stocked Erik Godunov's kitchen is. After living on the streets for six months, to see so much food and vegetables stacked so neatly in the pantry is mind-boggling.

I make pancakes as best as I can, and even though I'm pretty sure I'm not the world's best pancake maker, Kat sits at the stool and cuts them into chunks, grinning as she munches.

She's a pretty, precocious girl, braiding her own hair with skilled fingers after breakfast, her freckles making her look bright and happy. My heart aches when I think about how she lost her mother, and how she never had a father, my heart aches and I see a glint of myself in her.

"Uncle Erik said we can walk Bullet in the garden," she says after breakfast. "But really it's not a garden, Erin. It's *ooj*."

"Excuse me, young lady," I say, giggling as we carry our plates over to the sink. "And what exactly does *ooj* mean?"

She grins. "It means really, really big. *Duh.*"

"Sure we can walk him," I say. "Just let me wash these wishes."

"Let the maids do that, Erin."

"Kat," I say, turning to her. "I am very capable of washing a few dishes. In fact, it's good to do things yourself sometimes, to prove to yourself that you can stand on your own two feet."

I half expect her to snap at me, for the pampered spoilt rich girl to emerge from the playful façade.

But then she nods slowly and reaches over for the faucet. Something blossoms inside me, a maternal warmth I wasn't even sure was there after so many downtrodden years, and together we wash the dishes.

We could use the dishwasher.

But where's the fun in that?

Ha, ha. I've been living like crap for so long this is my idea of fun.

After breakfast, we wander the grounds, the day overcast and grey, but with no rain spitting down at us. I wear the boots supplied by the thin, intimidating man who picked me up off the streets and drove me to Mr. Godunov's estate.

As we walk, I try to look out for the man of the house himself, my skin tingling when I remember the way he stood in the doorway last night. He'd gone from seemingly friendly - when he was greeting his dog - to apparently angry as he stood up and stared at me.

I thought, *He hates me. He's going to fire me on the spot.*

He was wearing a steel grey suit the color of his hair, his jawline sharp, his greyish, fjord blue eyes biting and cold. His jaw held a light smattering of steel shadow and he was – is – *ooj*, as Kat might say.

Almost seven feet, built like a vending machine of muscle, every inch of him straining at the fabric of his suit.

When he enters rooms in regular houses – not this giant mansion, with bear-sized doors – I imagine he has to duck his head.

“Erin, did you know, I’m an orphan now?” Kat whispers, and I see the hint of sadness behind her cheery exterior.

It’s insane how quickly I feel like I’ve warmed to this little girl.

We’re sitting at the edge of the pond, lily pads floating across the surface, the magnolia tree showing its pink petals proudly as Bullet runs around the pond, chasing the birds that occasionally land, his mouth split into a wide magnolia colored grin.

And then, all at once, he leaps into the water with a giant splash and starts paddling to the other end.

“He loves swimming,” Kat explains.

We sit in silence for a time, and then I say, “I’m an orphan, too, Kat.”

She blinks in wonder. “Woah. Really?”

“Yes,” I say. “My parents, they passed away when I was very young. I don’t remember them at all, in fact, just stories.”

“Were they good stories?”

Your parents were fucking junkies, a particularly cruel case worker had snapped at me once, when I was twelve years

old, just to hurt me, to wound me. He'd been fired a few months later. *And, to be honest, I wouldn't be surprised if you die just like them. In your own piss and shit. Just another junkie OD'ing.*

"No," I whisper, blinking back a tear. "Not really."

"It's okay," Kat says, reaching across and pawing at my cheek. "You don't have to be sad. You got me now."

I smile and take her hand, and then both of us turn as Bullet leaps from the water and sprints at the hedges behind us.

Erik strides out into the clearing, raising his hand so that Bullet stops and then immediately sits.

"Uncle Erik doesn't let him jump on him when he has to go to work," Kat whispers.

I stand up, unsure of what to do with myself. I put my hands in front of me, interlocked, but that feels strange, too formal. And yet when I let them drop I feel ungainly. I'm wearing pants that suddenly feel too tight-fitting, making me feel ugly.

Erik is dressed in a suit again, this one dark blue, open at the collar to reveal a hint of hard muscle.

Work, Kat said.

And what work is that?

The Bratva.

I know that, of course, but part of the agreement to work for him is to pretend that I have no idea what the Bratva is.

Erik Godunov is a powerful man, and as he stands there, dripping sex appeal like melting wax, I try to remind myself that he's just my boss and nothing else.

I try not to think about those tree trunk arms wrapping around my body, holding me close.

Those lips, moving closer, brushing roughly against mine.

My body fires and tingles and a thrum moves through me, a compulsive, demanding thrum, as though my womb is screaming at me to run over to him and squash my body against his.

"I'm going to be working until the evening," he says, looking at Kat, and then glancing at me. His lips tremble. He seems angry. I wonder if he's going to fire me. "But you two will be okay, I trust? In any case, I'll be able to keep an eye on you."

"I'm sorry?" I mutter, confused.

"Uncle Erik has cameras everywhere," Kat says. "Look."

She points to the magnolia. I follow the track of her finger and then I spot it, a small black spot amidst the luscious pink, watching.

"I would not leave my dear sister's daughter in somebody's care without being able to watch them, of course."

"Of course," I mutter, a confusing thrill moving through me at the thought that Erik Godunov has been watching me.

Not like that, I have to remind myself. There's nothing sexual in his surveillance, just work, just taking care of his niece.

"Erin," he says after a moment. "Walk with me for a minute."

I swallow a ball of nervousness. It lodges in my throat and for a terrifying moment I don't think I'll be able to speak.

But then I mutter, "Okay."

Erik turns without a word and strides to the other edge of the pond, near where the hedges break into a long, wide open field. This place truly is *ooj*. He waves a hand and Bullet obediently stands up and turns to Kat, padding toward her.

I follow Mr. Godunov as we stroll around the field, the high fences standing in the distance, the hills rolling away and the city a promise on the horizon. I still have to remind myself that this is real, that I'm here, not on the streets or a grubby halfway house.

Erik walks close to me, his shoulder almost brushing against me.

I can smell his musky cologne and, under that – I'm almost sure – *his* scent.

It smells primal.

It smells – oh, Jesus – it smells like his *seed*.

These thoughts are so silly and foolish.

I'm probably about three dress sizes too large for this man.

And even if I wasn't, I'm nineteen years old and utterly inexperienced when it comes to that sort of thing. Nothing like the models and debutants and society women who must fall at his feet like sacrificial lambs the moment he so much as steps into a club.

"I want you to come to my office when I return from business this evening," he says after a long pause.

He stops and I do the same.

He stares into me with those greyish eyes, seeming to look right through me. Something pulses in his throat. His

strong, vice like hands twitch, and for a fearful moment I wonder if he's going to grab me, hurt me.

And then that moment passes, and I see him grabbing me, *taking* me, instead. I feel his hands all over my body, squeezing my nipples, gripping onto my thighs.

I imagine him bending me over and grinding the groin of his pants against me.

He's dangerous.

He's intoxicating.

I want him.

I can never have him.

He's just my boss. Nothing else. Focus on work. Don't be stupid.

I'm the plus size girl, the ignored girl, the street girl, the naturally curvy girl. I'm the girl most people don't even realize is there. I'm the shadow drifting through the corridors of high school.

"Um, sure," I whisper, my pause far too long.

"Good," he says.

Suddenly, Kat and Bullet appear, Kat with her hand resting on his head.

"Erin, can we go paint now? Uncle Erik, did you know Erin is going to be a famous painter?"

"Is that so?" he asks, the suggestion of a smirk toying with his lips.

"It's more of a hobby," I stutter, feeling a pang inside of me that I'd so easily downplay my biggest aspiration in life.

“Well, maybe a bit more. Just a silly dream. It won’t distract me from my work.”

“By all means,” Erik says, “paint. And don’t forget to visit me later.”

“Okay, Mr. Godunov.”

He nods and turns away, walking back towards the hedges that lead to the garden and then the house.

Visit me later.

But why?

What the heck does he want with me?

About a million unhelpful thoughts flit through my mind, ranging from the criminal to the murderous. And there’s one, a really silly one, that tells me the second I walk through that door he’s going to bend me over his desk and pull down my pants, he’s going to pull out his manhood and tease me with it, pushing it against my wet hole, and then, and then ...

But no.

Of course not.

It’s time to go paint.

CHAPTER THREE

E_{rik}

Later, I sit in my office, hand idly clicking between the different security feeds in the house.

The Irish have been kept at bay for now, but every time I leave for the city, I feel them trying to impose upon my territory, making plays they have no business making.

Soon, I fear, soon it may come to something drastic.

But that is the price of doing business.

And those are concerns for tomorrow.

For now, I switch to the second living room, which Erin and Kat used earlier today as their studio, and then to hunker down and watch some Disney movies. I watch as Erin, alone – Kat is asleep at this late hour – bends over the couch and reaches down for something.

She stands up with a paintbrush, a light smile on her face, eyes bright.

She's changed into sweatpants and a hoodie, and my cock could not – *could fucking not* – be harder as my eyes track her ass in those pants.

She tidies the rest of the room, leaning down to clean away the newspapers they put down to protect the rug earlier today, and now I can't stop myself.

I don't want to stop myself.

I reach down and undo my pants, loosening my belt, and then – glancing at the door to make sure it's locked – I take out my cock and grip it at the base, watching those gorgeous thick ass cheeks shifting as she scrunches up the paint smeared paper.

It would be so sweet to walk up behind her and drag the tip of my rock solid cock along those cheeks, leaving a trail of precome on the fabric of her sweatpants, making her shiver and sigh in anticipation.

"I'm going to fuck you like the fucking queen you are," I'd tell her. "But that doesn't mean I can hold back this beast inside of me. This monster, it needs to ravage you, to thrust into you hard and fast and feel your wet cunt clinging tightly onto me. I'll leave you shivering and gasping for more."

Those words bounce around my head as I slide a dollop of precome down my massive cock, my balls like two hot stars firing flares up my shaft, begging to release my seed.

I need to peel down those pants and grind my palm against her wet pussy until I can feel how soaked she is through her panties, and then tear them loose and savage her, take her like the wild fucking animal I am.

I keep my beast in a cage inside of myself.

I stay cold for business.

But with Erin—with Erin ...

I pause, a note of perturbation striking in me as I watch what she does next.

After tossing all the crumpled-up newspapers into a bag, she crosses over to the fireplace and reaches for a photo of Bullet as a puppy. My sister, Yekaterina, was the one who took that photo, my sister who was so senselessly taken in a car accident, sliding on an icy road and colliding with a tree.

“It’s just so cute,” she’d giggled, handing the photo, gold framed, to me over dinner one night. “You’ll display it, won’t you, Erik? Promise me?”

“Of course,” I muttered.

Now I watch as Erin takes down the photo and looks around conspiratorially, and then tucks it down her hoodie, hiding it.

I gasp and let go of my manhood, watching in disbelief.

This is not who she was meant to be, my queen, the woman who has finally made me feel something for the opposite sex where so many have disappointed. My interest never normally has a chance to flag, because it’s never up in the first place.

But now she walks from the living room like a thief, a guilty expression streaking across her features.

I hurriedly put my manhood back in my pants and sit up, gripping the edge of my desk until my knuckles turn white.

This complicates matters.

A thief.

In my world, stealing is a sign of disrespect.

And in my world, disrespect cannot be tolerated under any circumstances.

If word ever got out that somebody had stolen from me and I'd allowed them to get away with it ...

I sit back, taking deep breaths, calming myself in the way I'm practiced in.

In my life, I've experienced all sorts of drama, the sort of events that would make other, weaker men wilt. But I never do the same. I'll have to confront Erin, though, which was not why I told her to meet me here in the first place.

No, my plans were far, far different.

But now everything has changed.

The knock at the door comes only a few minutes later.

"Um, Mr. Godunov?"

I feel something weakening in me at the soft sound of her voice, a voice that could so beautifully sing lullabies to our little ones ... after I've hammered them juicily into her womanhood, her womb, of course.

"Come in," I growl.

The door opens slowly and in steps my queen.

In person, there is an even more animalistic urge in my body, a roaring to take her, every part of her, paint her with my tongue and then find the needy nub of her clit and work it with my hand until her squirting gushing lust drenches my hand.

I stand slowly and nod at the seat opposite me, across my imposing, oak desk.

She sits down and crosses her legs, looking up at me, biting her lip with her eyes wide. It's all too easy to imagine my cock squirting onto those full, fresh cheeks, although I doubt I'd ever waste a drop anywhere but in her womb.

But the image causes a surging of solidness in my manhood.

My dream woman is a thief.

"The photo," I say, staring firmly at her.

Her eyes widen even more and then she lets out a long sigh.

"Oh, that," she says. "I guess this looks bad huh."

"Yes," I growl, my voice quivering.

This is my woman.

I'm claiming her ... even if she doesn't know it yet.

Could she really steal from me?

Could my instincts truly be so wrong?

"It isn't what it looks like," she says. "I was going to paint it. It's such a cute photo, and I really wanted to paint it for Kat. But I guess, I don't know, I guess I thought you'd think I was cutting into my work time?"

I walk slowly around the desk, having to focus extremely hard not to pull my rock hard pole from my pants and guide it to her mouth, let it open in an *O* of surprise and then take it, all of it, right to the back of her precious fucking throat.

I reach down and touch her chin, guiding her eyes to mine, her skin unbelievably hot.

"You'd never lie to me, would you, Erin?" I ask her firmly.

"N-no," she stutters.

I can scent the lust on her.

Like a hunter, I can detect it.

And she's my prey.

"I just wanted to paint it. I promise. He's such a cute dog, Erik. Kat was telling me that you rescued him. Is that true?"

With an effort – otherwise I'll maul her – I let go of her chin and step back, sitting on the edge of my desk.

"Yes," I tell her. "He was just a runt of a pup when I found him in a crack den. Some people, Erin, some people are truly fucking barbaric. You should've seen how they were treating him. I took him in. I raised him. I trained him. And now he's loyal to me and I'm loyal to him. Did you steal that photo? Or were you going to paint it?"

A flicker of annoyance enters her expression.

"I've already said," she mutters.

"I need to be sure."

"Why?" she asks.

Because you're mine.

"Because you're my employee," I tell her. "And I will not – I will never – tolerate dishonesty. Look me in the eyes, Erin. Stand up and look me in the eyes and tell me the truth."

She leaps to her feet, flaring now, vivacious.

"The truth, Erik," she says, saying my name with a confidence I haven't yet heard from her. "The only thing that kept me going growing up was art. It was – is – my passion. It helped me to stay sane during the fucking hell that was my childhood. An orphan, moving from home to home, ignored, the poor loser. Whatever. I don't want pity.

But a few art teachers did take pity on me over the years and let me use their supplies. Life is so much easier when experienced through the end of a brush, okay? That's the truth. I'm not a thief. Even on the streets, I was never a thief, and do you know how insanely hard that is?"

She breaks off, panting.

My firecracker, my hellcat.

Curvy in all the right places.

Fierce in all the right instances.

"I had to ask," I tell her. "A man in my line of work can never be too careful."

I move closer to her, feeling her heat, her radiance. I move closer and closer until I'm almost pushed right up against her. I can read her eyes, the lust glinting, the desire screaming at me to take her right now, take her and never stop.

I wonder if we'll conceive our first child right here in the office.

I wonder if she'll cream all over my cock the moment I plunge inside of her, or if it will come after a few minutes of friction laced pumping, if she'll squeal and writhe as her white juice flows down my thick shaft.

I wonder how her lips will taste.

They look soft, but they form such biting words, and I know there will be prepossessed pressure in them, confident longing.

"And now I have to tell you something," I growl, leaning down, readying myself for the most important moment of my life—

A pounding.

A pounding at the door, a *knock-knock-knock-knock* that jolts me from the moment.

My staff knows not to disturb me in this office.

“Who is it?” I bark, even if I’m sure I already know.

“Boss.” It’s Igor. Of course it is. “I’m sorry. But it’s urgent. And you weren’t answering your phone.”

“I’m busy,” I snap.

“I’m sorry, Erik. But it’s the Irish.”

Fuck.

“I have to go,” I tell Erin. “Paint that photo. I’d love to see it. And believe me, Erin, we’re going to finish this later.”

I stride from the office, no longer fearing to leave her around my things.

I have cameras, yes.

But more importantly, I have trust.

I trust her and that could be dangerous, and yet I can’t find it within me *not* to trust her.

“This better be good,” I growl, bear like, as Igor and I walk down the corridor.

“They’re on the move. They’re making threats. They might even try and hit this place.”

“My home?” I mutter. “You really think Sebastian fucking Crawford is that stupid—”

I almost laugh when the noise blares through the house, the whining siren telling me that an alarm has been triggered.

The timing is just so depressingly perfect.

We're under attack.

CHAPTER FOUR

E_{rin}

“I don’t want to be a baby,” Kat says, “but I’m scared. I’m really scared.”

I sit next to her bed, my hand in hers, the door shut firmly behind us. Bullet sits at the door on his haunches, staring patiently, not growling, not making a noise. But there’s a quiet powerful aura around him.

Like Erik.

Back in the office, the way he leaned close to me triggered something wild and foolish inside of me, almost as though my wildest, dirtiest fantasies were going to come true right there.

He said he had to tell me something.

But what?

I can’t let myself dare to hope what I *wish* it was.

The alarm has stopped now, but the guards have ordered us to stay in here until we get the all-clear. The all-clear from

what, from who, I have no idea, but it's sending shards of fear through me.

For myself, sure, but mostly for Kat, her little face pinched in anxiety as she glances at the door and Bullet.

"What if the car that killed Mommy is gonna get me too?" she sobs, burying her face in her sheets.

"Bullet will protect us," I tell her, stroking the back of her head, her hair tangled from where her braid has come loose. "And if he fails, I'll protect us, okay, Kat? I've got one heck of a bite. You just haven't seen it yet."

Kat giggles through a sob and then looks up, meeting my eyes. She wipes her tears away and then manages a small, shaky smile.

"I really like you, Erin. And I've been sort'a thinking."

"About what?" I ask.

"Well," she says. "Well, well."

"*Well-well-well*," I tease, saying it in the silliest, highest pitched voice I can muster. "*Well-well-well*."

"Hey," she laughs, slapping my hand playfully. "I do *not* sound like that."

"What is it, Kat?" I ask, praying that whatever set that alarm off has gone, gone far away.

And maybe with it I can send away my nonsensical, self-sabotaging thoughts, thoughts that let me think absurd things like that Erik Godunov was about to bridge some unspeakable gap between us.

I felt my sex flaming, my body screaming, everything quaking and trembling in lust.

But then the alarm came and doused that fire, and perhaps that was for the best, the only way it *could* go, because then it meant I didn't have to torture myself with impossibilities.

Kat twirls her hair around her finger, suddenly shy.

"Nuthin," she murmurs.

"It doesn't sound like *nuthin*," I say. "Come on. Don't be a tease."

"I was just thinking, I dunno, but I was thinking, Erin, I don't know ... you're kinda like my best friend."

She looks down at the bed, her cheeks flaming red, and I feel a wave of warmth surging over me with the force of a tsunami.

I touch her chin - *he touched my chin, and it felt so good, so right* - and move her gaze to mine.

"You know what, Kat?" I say. "You're my best friend, too."

Her face lights up and she thrusts her hand toward me, pinkie finger extended. "Promise?"

"Promise," I say, wrapping my pinkie around hers.

"I wish you and uncle Erik would get married," she blurts.

"Woah," I laugh, heart thudding. *Me too*, a thought strikes, lightning like. *Me too, Kat*. "Where did that come from?"

"Erik and Erin," she sings. "It makes *so much* sense. And then you can be here forever and ever. Oh, look, Bullet's doing a dance."

I turn to find Bullet pawing at the door, panting excitably. A moment later, the door opens and Bullet steps back, and then leaps up at Erik, jumping around, probably just about as happy to see him as I am ...

Except I don't think it'd be as well received if I got on all fours and started panting for him.

You never know.

Erik, standing there in his sleek suit, his eyes peering down at Kat and me as we hold hands. Something flitters into his expression, something like approval, and then he takes a few steps forward, stroking Bullet behind the ears the whole while.

"Everything is fine," he says.

"What happened, uncle?" Kat asks.

He sighs. "Someone tried to steal one of my cars," he says. "But they're gone now. You're safe, Kat." He wanders over to her and offers his pinkie, unprompted. "I promise, okay?"

She beams and pinkie shakes him, and as I stare at him, another thought thunders into me.

He'd make an incredible father.

I let out a sigh, both at the thought and another notion that's just occurred to me.

What if it was Michael, my onetime stalker, the psychopath who has caused me so much heartache in my life, that tried to steal Erik's car?

The thought is just as absurd as everything else I have allowed to fritter through my mind lately, and yet an icicle of fear stabs into me, a whisper that it's a fact, he's here, he's coming to get me.

Again.

Michael Jenkins, my personal bogeyman.

Lucky me.

“You should go back to sleep,” Erik says, looking at his niece.

“I will,” she says. “But ... can you sit with me? Can you both sit with me? Please?”

I look up at Erik. Perhaps I’m imagining it, but I’m almost certain I see a moment of pride in those steely eyes.

And then a question, silently asked, *Shall we sit with my niece together?*

I move my chair aside, giving him room to kneel down, and then the three of us – Bullet, Erik, and I – sit in comfortable silence as Kat slowly drops off to sleep.

“Come with me, Erin,” he whispers about a minute after Kat has dropped off.

I stand, my whole body abuzz, and follow him out into the hallway.

Bullet lopes behind us as we walk through the house, this giant estate that is still so imposing to me, with the gold gilt running along the center of the walls, the classical paintings, the general Old World vibe of the place.

It’s probably the last place I’d ever expect to find myself, living on the street, day-to-day, wondering if tomorrow would bring more misery.

We take Bullet to his room and I watch, my heart pounding up to the back of my throat, as Erik kneels next to the Great Dane and scratches him behind the ear.

“Go to sleep, boy,” he says.

I don’t let myself think as I stride across the room, falling to one knee next to Erik and scratch Bullet’s other ear. Our hands brush as the dog tips his head back, mouth splitting

open in a grin as he enjoys a rub down from two people at once.

Erik glances at me, a pained expression on his face.

I'm once again left to wonder if I've angered him in some obscure, unforeseen way.

We stand up and Bullet bounds off to bed, and then we return to the hallway and, silently, without discussing it, I follow him through the house and into the main living room. The chairs in here are like thrones, burgundy in color with gold edging, a large medieval rug spread across the floor.

Erik leads us to the carved, patterned bar at the far end and rests his elbow against it, watching me with those penetrating eyes.

I feel his gaze sinking into me, exploring me, sending tingles all over my body.

I want this.

I want this bad.

But if I told him that, he'd laugh, I know he'd laugh.

I'm not *that girl*, the kind of girl who gets to be with a man like Erik.

"What happened tonight?" I ask him, lingering near the edge of the bar, fingers worrying at each other

.

"It's like I said," he sighs. "Somebody tried to steal one of my cars."

"And what happened to them?"

"They got away."

“You didn’t ...”

What the heck am I doing?

Shut up, shut up.

Never mention his business, never allude to it. The man who hired me for this position was incredibly clear about that, and here I am, about to plunge headfirst into that ugly mess.

“Didn’t what?”

“Hurt him?”

Erik smirks and springs up from the bar, moving with that lazy power so typical of him, a way of moving that belies his goliath’s size.

“How would you feel if I did?” he says. “He – they – whoever, they weren’t just going to steal the car, Erin. They were going to set my garage alight and burn my estate down. With Kat inside. With Bullet inside. With *you* inside.”

His voice catches at the end, a husky growl, and I stare at him as he moves closer, and closer.

He’s standing right in front of me.

And I can smell his lust, I’m sure I can, waves of his lust wafting from him and dripping all over me like liquid desire. I feel drenched in it, coated in it.

“I can’t hold myself back any longer,” he snarls, a bear emerging from a cave after wintertime, ready to claim his mate.

Before I can even process what’s happening, much less believe it, he’s grabbed me by the shoulders and pulled me towards him.

He leans down and suddenly his lips are on me, his rough lips pressing into me.

My mouth parts and my tongue finds his, tasting him, and all I can think is, *Jesus, it's really happening, I'm really kissing Erik Godunov.*

It doesn't seem real, intellectually, it seems like a dream. And yet the feeling, the actual physicality of it, is blisteringly tactile.

I can feel every inch of his lips, every texture of his tongue, every subtle shifting in his panting breath as he consumes more and more of me.

My sex grinds against my panties, every nerve in my body primed and thrumming, boiling and alive in a way I have never been before.

I realize my hands are just hanging at my sides and lift them, wrapping them around his shoulders and squeezing on tight, and even through the fabric of his suit I can feel them, his muscles, his bulging, rock hard muscles.

He stumbles forward, making a beast like growling noise as my bum knocks into the back of the couch.

An alarm squeals in my mind, even louder and more urgent than the one that screamed earlier this evening.

He's growling like a man who knows what he wants.

And he's going to take it.

But panic quivers in me.

Can I give it?

I'm not so sure I have what he's looking for, that I *am* what he's looking for.

Suddenly – again, without thinking, without reasoning – I’m breaking off the kiss, muttering the word *sorry* over and over, spinning and making for the door.

I walk down the hallway, a ringing in my ears, panic, panic, *panic*.

I’m not who you think I am, I want to scream. I’m just going to disappoint you.

CHAPTER FIVE

E_{rik}

I follow her down the hallway to her bedroom, a large room at the rear of the house, overlooking the garden. My manhood is a stiff rod in my pants as I step forward and lay my hand against her door, stopping her from closing it.

“What’s wrong?” I growl, my voice shaking.

My body feels like it could tear to horny pieces at any second, like a werewolf, a fucking werewolf, a beast called Desire. I need this woman so bad my balls are trying to implode, my seed battering war drums of want, telling me to fist that golden hair and bend her over so her big, juicy ass cheeks frame the pink pussy, and then push, push hard, fast, and spill every searing drop into the fleshy folds of her soaked sex.

“Erin,” I whisper, when she just stares at me. Tears beading in the corners of her eyes. I soften my voice, with an effort. “Tell me. You can always tell me anything.”

She looks up at me, biting her lip in the way that, even when she’s sad, drives carnal thoughts around my mind and

carnal feelings through my body.

There's a fucking freight train of lust barreling through me now, claiming every part of me just as fiercely as I'm going to claim her.

"I don't think you understand," I growl, moving closer when she just stares silently. "I'm claiming you, Erin. That means you're mine. That means you belong to me. Your lips, your hands, your perfect breasts, your fuckable ass, every curve in your perfect body, is *mine*. I'm laying claim to you because the second I heard your voice – not saw you, just heard your goddamn voice – I knew that you were the woman I've been looking for my whole life.

"I won't pretend to explain it with reason. Because this, Erin, this is far beyond reason. This is me telling you that if some poor bastard came in here right now and tried anything on with you, I'd break his fucking neck without thinking about it. You're mine."

"I'm yours?" she whispers. I can hear her want to believe it in her voice, her longing. "Am I ... really, Erik? This isn't some joke?"

I move even closer so that her breasts press against me, crushing them. I can feel her nipples through her shirt as I realize she's not wearing a bra.

God help me, this large breasted sex goddess isn't even wearing a bra.

"Aren't you going to invite me into your bedroom?" I ask with a smirk.

She bites her lip, lets it go, and bites it again.

It's a show I could watch all day if it were not for the mounting pressure inside of me, my shaft trying to explode

as my body savors the pressure of hers.

“Erik, I want to,” she whispers finally. “I’m so shocked you feel this way, really. I mean, heck, part of me wanted it to be true. But I just thought it was a silly fantasy. And I *want* to invite you in. But I’m scared.”

“Scared of what?” I ask, lifting my hand and stroking her hair from her eyes, her gorgeous sunny blonde hair. “You need to know something, Erin. You never have to be afraid again, not with me protecting you. I’ll never let anything happen to you. I’ll die – I’ll kill – before that happens.”

“I’m scared you won’t want me,” she whimpers, taking a step back into her bedroom.

I stalk closer, keeping our bodies in contact the whole time.

And then I wrap my arms around her and tug her toward me, squeezing onto the perfect plumpness of her ass cheeks.

She lets out a quivering sigh, her eyelids fluttering as I sink my hands into the tasty juiciness of her ass, her perfect fucking ass, an ass that deserves to bounce up and down against my abs as I plunge wetly inside of her.

“I’m a virgin,” she says.

She spins away from me, breaking my grip as she walks over to the window, staring out at the garden. The room is shadowy and her figure makes a tempting silhouette as she stands there, framed in the night light.

“So I guess that pretty much means whatever wild fantasies you’ve got about me are completely unrealistic. I’m not some porn-star-ready fricking, I don’t know, *sex machine*. I don’t know all the moves. All those moves the women you’re used to probably know.”

I walk quietly up behind her, not a single floorboard creaking despite my size.

“I’ve never even done anything sexual with a boy, honestly,” she goes on. “I know, it’s sad, it’s humiliating. I’m a nineteen year old virgin and I’ve never even gotten naked with a boy.”

I stop close to her, feeling my manhood almost leaping like a viper from my pants, ready to taste every inch of her precious body.

“Erin,” I growl. “Turn around. Face me.”

“Why?” she whimpers.

“Because I told you to,” I snarl.

A shiver moves through her as she turns to face me.

Her jeweled green eyes glisten.

She stares at me, into me, and all at once I know, with more certainty than I have ever known anything, that I am going to make this woman pregnant, and soon.

“Erin,” I growl, stalking close. “The fact that you’re a virgin just makes me want you more—”

“Yeah, right ...”

“Yes,” I say firmly. “Right. To know that nobody, all the fucking idiots you’ve ever met, has never seen just how perfect and gorgeous and goddamn *ravagable* that body is, Jesus, it just makes me feel so lucky. And I get it. You’re nervous.”

“Um, yeah,” she giggles, her smile a slice of summer bright light.

“I don’t blame you. But let me help you. Let me show you just how gorgeous you are. I need this, Erin. I need to taste you. I need to feel that ass without any fabric between us. I need to drink your juices deeply, drink every fucking drop. I want to be civilized about it, but the truth is, despite all the luxuries of my life, I’m not a civilized man. Not when it comes to us, this moment. No, now, I’m a savage. And I need you. *Now, now.*”

She collapses against me, her lust more powerful than her anxiety.

“Will you?” she whispers. “Just ... do that? And nothing else. For now.”

I laugh deeply and take her by the hand, gorgeously sweaty, and lead her toward her king size bed with its light silken sheets.

“Will I?” I smirk. “There’s nothing on this planet that could stop me, Erin. That pussy belongs to me. And I’m done imagining its taste.”

I guide her so she’s on her back and then kneel down, grabbing her pants and pulling them down, the beast inside of me unleashing now.

My mouth starts to salivate as though I’ve been starving and now I finally get to feed.

She makes a cute as fuck squealing noise when I pull her pants down and toss them to the floor. Her panties go the same way.

And then ...

Oh, fuck.

I lean back and stare at her pussy, her legs wide open for me, her lips tangled and glistening with where the wetness

has smeared up and down them. Her pink hole is winking at me, her clit an engorged, hungry little nub.

I squeeze onto her thighs, letting my fingers sink into her deliciously supple flesh.

She shivers, and looks down at me through the V her legs make.

“Is something ... wrong?”

“Wrong?” I repeat, disbelief making my voice grim. “Wrong? This is the most perfect thing I’ve ever seen in my life. Fucking hell. *Look* at your pussy. It’s magnificent. Let’s just hope it tastes the same. Though I know it will.”

I drag my lips up her thigh, causing her skin to goose pimple, and then I open my mouth wide and take in as much of her pussy as I can.

I push my tongue forward and move it around her clit, all the while sucking on the rest of her pussy, slurping on her lips so that her tanginess coats my tongue and my teeth and slides gorgeously down my throat.

I swallow, tasting her womb, tasting her eagerness to give me a child.

I can feel her body opening up for me, deep inside of her, her need to give me a child making her pussy get hotter and wetter by the second.

I slide my hands down and wedge them between her ass cheeks and the sheets, squeezing onto the round fleshy globes of her plus size perfect rump. For a crazy second, I almost think I’m going to blow my damn load in my pants, her ass is so curvy and voluptuous, an ass made for bouncing as I fuck her, fuck her hard.

I push forward and drink in more of her, sucking, licking, *attacking*.

She moans, biting her lip, her cries of pleasure muffled as her body twitches. She claws at the sheets and, after a few minutes, she begins to buck and writhe like she can't contain her pleasure anymore.

She grinds her wet hole against my mouth, up and down, again and again as my licks come quicker, firmer.

I begin to make low growling noises, my seed writhing all around my body, my manhood so stiff it could snap in half. I push closer, harder, and all at once she empties her beautiful juices all over my mouth.

"Ah, ah," she whispers, her voice choked, struggling to even make that sound.

I massage those large, juicy ass cheeks, images flitting into my mind of my rock hard come slick cock sliding between them, finding the pinkness of her sex as my eyes focus on the roundness of her ass.

I swallow as her tangy wetness flows down my throat, and then, once her orgiastic moans have simmered down to panting, I can't take it anymore.

I stand up and reach down for my cock, in a fugue of lust, and only stop when I see the panicked look streak across her face.

"I can't," she whispers. "He'll kill me if he finds out I've been with another man."

Someone is threatening my queen.

I let my hand fall, curl into a white knuckled fist.

I stare at the woman I'm claiming, now and forever.

“Tell me,” I snarl. “Tell me who you’re scared of, Erin.”

She leans up, grabbing the sheets and pulling them over her bare legs. We share a look and a smile twitches at her lips.

I can read her, the suggestive look in her eyes.

She’s silently telling me that if she didn’t pull the sheet up, I wouldn’t be able to control myself.

And she’s right.

“Okay,” she whispers. “I’ll tell you, Erik. I know you expect honesty. But can we go outside? I think I need some fresh air.”

CHAPTER SIX

E_{rin}

We sit on the back deck, the fire lit and licking at the air with yellow-red tongues of flame. The sun has set now and, this far from the city, the stars make a glittering blanket of the sky, only a few clouds dotted here and there, gray and drifting slowly.

I hug the blanket around myself, annoyed that I couldn't just forget my anxiety back there. When Erik went down between my legs, it was like he was opening a door inside of me, introducing me to a world of bodily sensations I had never dreamed of before.

But when he reared up like a bear on its hind legs, his paw reaching down for this manhood, a wave of panic crashed over me almost painfully, making me want to gasp for air, to flee like a rodent stuck in a maze.

I saw *his* face, which seems like the most unfair thing in the universe.

The most special night of my life, it could've been, and yet the aftermath of what this twisted prick did to me made

that impossible.

I look up as Erik returns with two glasses of soda, placing them down and then sitting across from me on the interwoven wicker chair. He leans forward, resting his forearms on his knees.

His back bulges, muscular, and his eyes seem darker as he stares at me.

I can read the protective rage in the tightness of his expression, the way his fists clench.

“The stars are beautiful tonight,” I whisper, aware I’m just talking for the sake of it, to delay, so I don’t have to face the big bad wolf in my mind.

“They are,” he agrees, glancing up briefly. “Not as beautiful as you, but still.”

I giggle, and then find myself waving a hand. The way Erik can bring me out of a darkened mood truly is incredible, a skill I don’t even have with myself, as though he completes a part of me I never knew was there.

I’m still reeling from the suddenness of all of this, from Erik telling me he was claiming me to the closeness in the bedroom.

My sex aches in longing and my womb is still screaming at me.

Why did you stop? We need his seed, silly girl. It’s all we need.

“When I was seventeen,” I whisper, prompted by some inner need to be close to him, “I had this really great opportunity. I don’t want to be self-pitying, but you could say it was one of the few great opportunities I’ve ever had. I got to go to this summer camp and work on my art. You

know, out there amidst the nature, drawing inspiration from the beauty. It was actually amazing. For a while.”

Erik doesn’t speak.

He just watches me, an understanding glint in his eyes now.

I take strength from his silence, from his mature understanding that not every pause has to be filled with unnecessary words.

“Anyway, they had these counsellors there, and that was one of the requirements of the camp. It was for underprivileged kids, and I guess I fit into that category back then. The counsellor, he ... He wasn’t very good at his job.”

I laugh hollowly, blinking back tears that try to spring to my eyes and slide hotly down my cheeks.

Erik reaches across and touches my hand, squeezing it, and then moves his chair closer so that he can wrap his arm around me. I lay my head against the stony comfort of his shoulder.

“Actually, what I mean to say is that he developed a really fucking unhealthy obsession with me. He started to tell me he loved me, to tell me that all my problems could be fixed if I fell in love with him too. He tried to get me to do things. And when I wouldn’t, he turned nasty. He killed rats and hid them in my pillow. He once tried to kidnap me. I ran from the camp. I ran from school. I fled to the streets.”

My eyes are stinging with the effort of holding back the tears, my lips trembling as I try not to sob.

I’ve never talked about this before.

I’ve locked it in a box inside myself, promising never to look there, never to put myself through that. It’s too painful.

"I thought I'd be safe from him on the streets," I whisper. "But he kept showing up. Jesus, he's like the bogeyman, Erik. A month would pass and I was sure I'd gotten away from him, but then I'd see him across the street. Following me. I've had to run away from him more times than I can count. And do you know what the worst part about running through New York is? It's how *disgusting* I felt. The grubby homeless girl, people turning up their noses at me. They don't care about my story. They just want to get away from the stinking grubby ugly homeless *freak*."

"No," Erik whispers, dragging me onto his lap, enveloping me in his embrace. "If they looked at you in that way, Erin, if they looked at somebody who needed help in that fucking way, then *they're* the ugly ones. You're beautiful. Even dirty from the streets, you'd be beautiful. You can't hide what you have."

"Thanks," I whisper. "I don't know if I believe you, but thanks."

"It's true," he says, mouth close to my cheek, painting me in his warm, consoling breath.

"Anyway," I say, leaning back against him. "The worst of it was when he tried to kidnap me from a hostel. I woke up and he was standing over my bed, handcuffs in one hand, black bag in the other. The only reason I woke up is because living on the streets does that to you. It makes you hyper-vigilant. I also thought it might sort of help me lose weight, but apparently this is just what I naturally look like."

"Erin," Erik growls, squeezing me close to him, his hand resting on my belly and somehow, somehow, not recoiling in disgust. "You are the perfect weight. Everything about you is perfect. You never have to worry about that."

"Yeah, right," I mutter.

“I mean it,” he snarls.

“I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“Earlier, you know ... not being able to ...”

He strokes his hand through my hair, brushing it from my forehead in a way that makes me tingle. I still have to remind myself that this isn’t a dream, that one of the junkies at the halfway house hasn’t slipped me his goods.

But no.

It’s happening.

I’m working here. Erik wants me. *He wants me.*

Maybe one day – hopefully soon – I’ll actually be able to accept that.

“Don’t worry,” he says, and I turn to find a playful smirk on his steel shadowed lips. “I clearly took the wrong approach, coming at you like an animal. I need to treat you like the queen you are ... for a while. So I’ll take you out tomorrow night, wine and dine you, and then – if you can forget that disgusting cur who doesn’t even deserve to breathe your air – and then I’ll unleash the beast.”

“I’ll try,” I whisper. “I want to, Erik. I really do. So badly.”

“There’s no rush,” he whispers, a rumble in his voice that tells me if I said I was ready right now, he’d take me, maybe even lose control and take me here, the risk of his staff discovering us be damned. “Just know that when the time comes, my seed is going to be extremely eager to get inside of you. I can’t promise to be a gentleman in the bedroom, only at dinner.”

“That sounds amazing,” I say. “But I don’t really have any fancy clothes.”

“Oh.” He pauses. “Then I’ll have some delivered here for you. I’m not much of a fashionista. Choosing men’s clothes is easy. A suit, a shirt, a tie, a watch. But women’s clothes are a different matter. I’ll order a variety, I suppose.”

I feel a flush flooding me. “That’s very generous.”

He laughs grimly. “I’d do far, far more to be able to have dinner with you, Erin. I’d slay a lion in unarmed combat if that’s what it took. I’d walk to the heart of a goddamn volcano. You’re mine, and if I have to spend every second from now until the end of fucking time convincing you of that, then I will.”

“You’re angry,” I note, sensing the shift in his voice.

“I want this man’s name,” he admits. “This stalker.”

“Why?” I say, leaning back slightly. “Are you going to hurt him?”

“Would it bother you if I did?” he asks.

“I’m not sure,” I say. “He’s a monster, clearly. He’s probably done this to other women. I guess the problem is, Erik, that I’m not sure I want you to be the sort of person who so easily hurts people.”

The words just come out, somehow devoid of self-consciousness, somehow not crippled with my fears of how he’s going to respond.

Is this what openness is?

Is this what a real human connection is?

There must be something crazy happening here.

Otherwise I wouldn't be able to talk with him like this.

"Is that who you think I am?" he asks, a savage softness in his voice.

I slink to the side, back onto the blanket, and turn my gaze up to the stars.

I hope not.

"His name is Michael Jenkins," I say. "At least, that's the name he used at camp."

"It's his real name," Erik snarls with certainty.

"How do you know?" I ask.

"Is he a lanky man, gangly, with red hair and freckles?"

I start, my heart thudding, my palms sweating. An absurd, deranged idea occurs to me.

What if Michael and Erik are in on this together, and Michael has somehow arranged for Erik to lead me here for some twisted purpose?

"Yes," I whisper.

Erik sighs. "Michael Jenkins is a known associate of the Irish mob. A whipping boy, you might call him. It would seem he also has other interests, apart from petty crime. Christ, what a small town this sometimes is."

I turn back to him and find that he's staring off into the shadows in the garden, working his jaws from side to side.

"You're thinking about Michael."

"Yes."

"About all the things you'd like to do to him."

“I am.”

I move closer and run my fingers along the very light beard of his jawline, and then turn his face to me, our eyes locked.

“Let’s just focus on us, for now, please?” I whisper.

He sighs and then takes my hand. “Yes, Erin, for you. For you.”

He pulls me close and we sink closer together, glowing under the starlight.

CHAPTER SEVEN

E_{rik}

The four of us – me, Erin, Kat and Bullet – sit near the fountain in a small circle around the picnic blanket, Bullet with his tongue lolling as Kat plays with his ears, giggling. I watch her, making sure she's being careful and respectful, and then Bullet grins and laps at her cheek.

I have my answer.

Erin looks incredible in her emerald green dress, the same shade as her eyes. It's inset with small diamond-like glistening points, from the neck to the hem, making her sparkle in the setting sun. Her hair is wavy controlled mayhem down to her shoulders, and she's wearing a light, elegant coating of makeup, enhancing the beauty already there.

Her legs are bare, and as she sits there with them folded beneath her, I have to look away, lest my lust overwhelm me.

I have to remember that Kat and Bullet are here.

I have to restrain the savage within.

That has been difficult today at work, thoughts of Michael bouncing around my head. We're already at war with the Irish – this strain of the mob, the one that deals in drugs and women and pain and abuse – and now this is just another reason to hate them. There could be a good Irish mob one day, perhaps, but this gang led by Crawford is not it.

I push those thoughts aside and remind myself that this evening is about Erin and me.

Us.

Kat has been looking slyly between the two of us ever since I announced that we were going out this evening and she would be in the care of Igor, the maids, the guards and above all Bullet.

She knows something's going on between us.

And I think my niece might approve.

"Why won't you say where you're going, uncle?" she asks. "Erin really, really wants to know."

"Erin does," my queen agrees, a sparkle in her glance, a bright glint in her eyes. "It's a long drive to the city. Shouldn't we get going soon?"

I smirk. "I think we'll be okay."

"What are you *planning*, uncle?" Kat says, kneeling up and narrowing her mother's, Yekaterina's, eyes at me. "Is it something amazing?"

"Erin will have to be the judge of that."

"Are you and Erin boyfriends and girlfriends now?" she asks in her forward, plain, endearing way.

Erin blushes and turns to face the fountain and I find myself smirking and turning away, too.

How can I explain to Kat that we are so much more than that, that the moment I heard her, just her voice, I knew that her womb was the place where my seed belonged?

How can I explain the absolute rightness of this all?

In the end, I don't have to, because the blades of the helicopter cut the air and the engine roars like a beast as it crests the top of the house and makes for the rear of the garden, through the hedges, toward the field where it'll land.

"Wait," Erin says, mouth falling open. She gapes at me. "Is that for *us*?"

I climb languidly to my feet and then wink down at Kat. "Unless *you've* ordered a helicopter for this evening, little lady?"

"I did, actually," she giggles. "Me and Bullet are going to Disneyland."

I offer Erin my hand and she takes it. As the four of us walk towards the rear of the estate, I can't help but think that this is what it's going to be like when we have a family of our own, and of course Kat will always have a place in our home.

And Bullet.

I don't like to think about Bullet and the future, though, because dogs don't live as long as people. And that's fucking unfair.

The helicopter comes into view and I turn to Erin, finding her smiling brightly.

Even now, I can't stop myself from imagining my hand sliding up those creamy, full thighs, sliding against her panties, feeling her juiciness.

I have to control myself, beat those instincts down for the time being, and it's hard, really damn hard.

"Are you ready?" I ask her.

"I think so," she laughs. "I mean yes, yes. Erik, I'm ready."

The city is laid out before us in a glittering landscape as we sit atop the private skyscraper restaurant, empty apart from Erin and me. She leans back in the silver chair, glancing down at the city, her mouth bespeaking the same wonder that led her from the helicopter and into the side door of our own personal heaven.

We sit at the window, the glass reinforced and the room warm, protected from the cold of the high New York sky. All around us, candles are lit, glowing softly.

I reach across the table and grab the electronic pads, taking mine and handing Erin hers.

"What's this?" she asks.

"Well, don't you want to order?" I smirk.

She tilts her head at me for a moment, cute and sexy as a fucking goddess. Then she giggles.

Her giggles could cure a million illnesses, I'm convinced.

"No waiters?"

"One of my trusted men will carry our dishes from the kitchen to us," I tell her.

“Why?” she asks.

“Because I take every measure at safety in this life, where lesser men assume they are invincible. I won’t have some criminal pretending to be a waiter and getting close to my woman. I’ll always protect you, Erin. Always.”

“Woah,” she says, scrolling. “This is the biggest menu I’ve ever seen.”

“If they don’t have what you want,” I say, “just type it in, and they’ll make it for you anyway.”

She reaches across the table now, tightening her hand around mine, a blemish of shyness making her bite her lip.

“Erik, this means so much to me. I never dreamed I’d be in a place like this, looking down on the city I was once just a rat in, a rat caught in a maze ... a maze of concrete. Not that I mean to go all poetic or anything.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I say, giving her hand a squeeze.

“Do what?”

“Be ashamed of yourself, of your words, of anything.”

“I think you might regret saying that,” she laughs, turning back to the menu.

“Oh, why’s that?” I humor.

“Because I’m looking at this menu, and I’m thinking, yeah, I could go for the wagyu or the lobster frittata or the cassoulet, whatever that is—”

“It’s just a casserole,” I chuckle.

“But do you know what I really want?” she says. “I want a big, juicy, double cheeseburger. But the idea of sitting here

chowing down on a double cheeseburger on what's supposed to be a civilized date, well ... I guess I should order a salad, right?"

"Salad," I mutter, shaking my head. "Did you just say *salad*? Let me tell you something, Erin, and I am deadly serious here. If you even think about ordering a salad I'm going to bend you over this table and spank you until your ass is red."

She flushes. "Um, maybe I *want* to order the salad now?" she whispers, glancing away from me as her shyness moves through her.

Perhaps I really am a twisted beast of a man, but thinking about a double cheeseburgers makes me think about her ass cheeks, and her juice, her precious fucking juice, and as I stare at her I can taste it from last night, tangy on my tongue. Brushing my teeth felt like a betrayal last night, getting rid of that taste.

"Be careful what you give me permission to do," I growl. "Because I'll take it. Every inch."

"So what you're saying is you're forcing me to order the burger, then?"

I can't help but smirk. "Yes, I suppose you could frame it in that way. I'll order us both the burgers. I've got an appetite tonight."

We order our food and drinks. One of my men - Dobry, a man who's been with me since he was nineteen years old - brings our sodas and then retreats.

"You can drink, if you want," Erin mutters. "I wouldn't resent it, I mean."

"I don't drink," I tell her. "I like to keep a clear head."

“Woah,” she says. “I just assumed you’d be a real vodka chugger.”

I laugh again, and then realize that I’ve laughed more this evening with Erin than I have in years. Except with Kat and Yekaterina and Bullet, perhaps, but they are anomalies in my life.

Just like Erin.

She is the most beautiful anomaly of all.

“I’ve seen what it can do to men, how it can warp them. I have no interest in it. I don’t care if others want to drink, though.”

“Living on the streets,” she mutters, “you get to see a lot of that, too. It’s not pretty. Plus, my parents...”

She trails off and scratches at the table.

“That’s not exactly fun dinner conversation, though, is it?”

“I never knew my parents,” I tell her, and the words lift a massive weight off my chest. I’ve never talked about this, except with Yekaterina. “My sister and I were raised in an orphanage. When I was old enough, I worked my ass off so that we’d never have to worry about anything again. I did what I had to do. I made my fortune.”

I look down at the city, this glittering, grimy, magnificent city which has given me so much and taken so much.

“I’m so sorry, Erik,” she whispers.

“Don’t be,” I tell her. “I’m only telling you so you know it’s okay to share, that you don’t have to be ashamed. Not with me.”

“They were junkies,” she sighs. “*Junkie, junkie, junkie.* That’s all I heard growing up. It seemed like there was

always someone there ready to remind me just what massive failures my parents were. After a while, I got tired of hearing it. It didn't make it any less true, obviously. But I just didn't care anymore."

I look at her again, feeling a crashing certainty, *another* moment of iron clad sureness, that this is her, the woman I've been searching for.

"You're going to make an amazing mother, Erin."

"Oh, stop," she giggles, turning her face away in embarrassment.

"I mean it," I say passionately. "I can just see it now, all of our children dressed in their fancy little clothes, sitting obediently for a portrait as you sit there, my queen, painting them. You'll be a huge painter by then. A worldwide success. And we'll have, oh, I'd say about six or seven children to keep our home happy. Kat will be off somewhere, perhaps working as a veterinarian as she has sometimes discussed lately. And everything will be perfect."

Erin blinks and her eyes glisten wetly.

I reach over and brush her warm tears away.

"That sounds amazing," she whispers. "But do you really think children with your genes are going to be obedient, Erik?"

I squeeze her hand again, harder. "You might have a point there," I agree.

Then, from the entrance way, Dobry clears his throat.

I turn and he's standing there with two silver platters. I nod shortly and he brings them forward, laying them down carefully before disappearing from the room.

Outside, a plane passes by, insanely close up this high. Its lights flash and for a moment it's like we're in the clouds, though there are so few clouds tonight.

"This smells delicious with the lid *on*," she gasps. "I bet it's going to taste like absolute heaven."

"I've already tasted heaven," I tease. "And it didn't taste much like a burger. Tasted pretty perfect, though."

She flushes, giving me a cute as hell look.

"You're dirty," she giggles.

"Yes," I say. "I am."

Later.

Later, if she's ready, I'm going to take her, claim her, paint her in vivid, lust fueled colors.

My seed warms.

I lift the platter.

The burgers are gourmet and delicious looking, but nothing, nobody, is as appetizing as my Erin.

CHAPTER EIGHT

E_{rin}

We sit on the open air balcony of the luxury hotel suite, the wooden decking sleek and seemingly brand new. The hot tub is off to our left, bubbling invitingly, and hot air fans us with warmth as we make major, *major* eyes at each other.

The dinner was like a revelation, realizing with shattering certainty how close Erik and I truly are.

He's an orphan, too.

I never knew that, but the longer the meal went on, the more we talked about it.

His rise in the Bratva, starting as a courier and then participating in a fighting ring at the age of nineteen, proving himself with his fists first and then his brains later. And then using money stolen from a drug dealer to start his own legitimate business, growing it, until now more of his businesses are legitimate than not.

I'm not naïve. Nobody who lives on the grimy streets of any city can afford to be. He could be lying to me with his talk of

legitimate businesses.

But the thing is, I know he's not.

I know it's dangerous to trust. But I trust him, wholeheartedly, unequivocally, I trust this man.

He takes a sip of his drink and smirks at me.

"What are you thinking about?" he asks.

Say it, say it, a voice urges inside of me.

My nerves try to take hold.

My anxiety tries to force me to second guess.

But somehow I push all of that aside as I sit up straight, folding my legs, noticing the way his eyes flit to my thighs. And for the first time in my life, I don't think that a man must be assuming I'm disgusting.

I think about how sexy I might look, no, *do* look to him, my man.

My man.

"I'm thinking it would be a shame to let that hot tub go to waste," I whisper.

There, the words are out.

Erik smirks, places his drink on the sleek glass table, and then rises slowly to his feet.

My mouth falls open as he starts to grapple with his buttons. He's dressed in a cyan shirt, the same pallor as his eyes, and as he unbuttons confidently with one hand, the fabric squeezes onto his muscles as though trying to hold on for dear life, as though it knows that at any moment he could tear it to shreds.

His chest is revealed with each popped button, a sheet of muscle.

“Well?” he says, pulling off the shirt to show a sleek, muscled torso that’s carved like marble, his pectorals two giant mounds, his abs a solid block of brick. “What are you waiting for?”

“Are you serious?” I gasp.

He smirks and kicks off his leather shoes, and then starts to unbuckle his belt.

“I’m deadly fucking serious,” he growls. “Take off that dress. Get in that hot tub. Now, Erin. I can’t wait anymore.”

I stand up as though his words are invisible strings tugging me to my feet, and then without giving myself time to doubt I pull at my clothes. The hot air pricks my skin, makes it tingle, as I quickly tear myself into nakedness.

Then, sooner than I can believe, I’m standing in front of him, naked except for my panties.

Erik is naked, too, and he’s like a statue, all carved, seething muscle. His manhood points straight up, the size of my forearm, the veins throbbing, his head engorged and glistening with precome.

“Fuck,” I whisper. “Oh my God.”

Snap, he tears my panties away, tossing them to the floor.

I squeal as he takes me by the shoulders and guides me towards the hot tub, lowering me in as the warm water laps at me, the bubbles sizzling.

And then he slides in after me and pushes close, heat surrounding me, bubbles bursting and tingling against my sex and my clit, my everything.

“I want to be a gentleman,” he chuckles savagely. “But I can’t. I need that pussy. I need it now.”

He grabs my shoulders and spins me around.

I gasp and grip the edge of the hot tub, pushing my ass out instinctively, offering myself to him like he’s a hunter and I’m prey.

But I’m willing prey.

I want to be hunted, *need* to be hunted, by him, my alpha, my man, my protector, my bear, my beast.

“You have no idea how perfect your ass looks all wet like this,” he groans, sliding his hands over my cheeks, leaving a trail of sensation. “Stick it out. More. More.”

I do as he says, hearing the tremoring insistence in his voice, the growling undertone of it. He sounds like he’ll explode – or the world will – if I don’t do what he says.

And I want to do what he says.

Always.

“Fuck,” he snarls, stroking the head of his sword against my sex, up and down my lips, coming close to my hole, closer each time. “You’re soaked. You’re fucking soaked for me.”

I wriggle against him, my pussy flaming, something deep inside me quivering and fluttering in need for him to take me.

“Beg for my seed,” he says firmly. “Tell me how badly you want it.”

“I want it,” I moan, wriggling, feeling his shaft between my ass cheeks. “Fuck me, Erik. Please take me. Take me hard and fast. Put our first baby in my womb. I can feel how badly I want it. My womb is screaming at me. I’m—”

But then I can't speak anymore.

He grabs my shoulders and, in one fluid motion, he pushes himself deeply inside of me.

I gasp and almost fall forward, but his confident grip on my shoulders holds me up, pulling me towards him as he thrusts into me. I feel my ass cheeks flattening against the hardness of his abs, and his cock slides deeper, and deeper.

And then *somehow deeper*.

I feel a note of pain—but then it's gone.

Pleasure blossoms and I feel my womb doing a war dance of celebration, ready for this battle, this moment.

He keeps one hand on my shoulder to pull me towards him, becoming more savage and unchained with each carnal thrust. The other smooths over my soaked ass cheeks, squeezing.

I turn to find his lips twisted and his eyes feral and wide, staring at me with the complete abandon of a man who couldn't stop even if a meteor crashed into the city outside.

I reach back and claw onto his abs, stroking my hand down the shining muscles, feeling the ridges and the pulsating power of him.

His whole body is tight and feels like it's ready to burst, his veins standing out wetly and prominently against the carved muscles of his skin.

I squeeze my legs together, tight around his cock, my pussy flaming as the bubbling hot tub water blasts against my clit.

I slide back, the wetness making everything feel intense, like there's an orb of euphoria ready to explode inside of me, explode and seep, orgiastic, down my thighs.

“You better cream on my fucking cock soon,” he growls, panting, groaning.

He squeezes onto my ass harder, staring in wonder down at my cheeks as they slap against his abs.

“Fucking hell. Your ass is perfect, Erin, it’s fucking *perfect*.”

“I’m—I’m—”

I can’t speak as an entirely new feeling flurries inside of me.

I feel like the whole sky is collapsing down on me.

Everything is spinning and surging and coming together and falling apart, and then, in a buckshot moment of release, all the pent-up pressure inside of me lets fly.

I gasp and slide down the length of him, the thickness seeming even larger inside of me as his cock pulses against the walls of my quivering pussy.

I have to collapse forward, everything within me focused on the pumping of his hips.

He wraps his arms around me, his forearms bracing my breasts, his torso laid flat against my back as his hot wet rock hard cock thunders into my pussy.

“You’re creaming so fucking beautifully for me,” he growls in my ear. “Keep going. Show that fucking womb how bad you want it. Cream, Erin. *Cream* all over my dick.”

I feel my pussy squirting, squeezing out wave after wave of ecstasy.

And then Erik roars and brings his mouth to my shoulder, biting softly, moaning through the bite as his cock shifts inside me.

I can feel his seed shooting up his shaft, feel it in the undulations of my own pleasure, *our* pleasure.

He lets go of my shoulder and strokes his hand along my cheek, turning my face so that our lips can just about meet in the tangle of pleasure.

"Jesus," I gasp, as the last of my come fires out of me, his into me, my squirting release and his seed mixing in my aching pussy. "Oh my God, Erik. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*."

We collapse into the hot tub together, the water splashing all around us.

A laugh escapes my lips and I turn to find Erik with a smirk on his face. I follow his gaze and see that he's looking at the redness in the water.

After a delay, I realize it's my virginity, and a same colored blush rises to my cheeks.

"No," he whispers, running his hand through my hair. "It's perfect, Erin. Don't be ashamed. It's a sign that you waited, waited for me. And now you have me - we have each other - I *own* you - forever. Forever."

"Forever," I echo, laying my head against his chest, feeling the water against my cheek and, past that, the hammering of his possessor's heartbeat.

He sinks back and for a while we just enjoy the bubbling of the water, and then Erik's hands strays down from my shoulders to my breasts.

His fingers move around my nipples, making them hard, making them tingle.

I bite down on my lip and he tilts his head at me.

“Fuck,” he groans. “Do you think you could come for me, Erin, just like this?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper, and then my voice catches. “M-maybe.”

He stares down at me with the heat and fury and intensity of a flaring sun, and his powerful fingers keep stroking around my nipples, tugging at them softly, tweaking them. The sensation is entirely new and strange, and the tingling doesn’t stop.

It gets faster, harder.

I shift my hips, grinding against the bubbles, as he grabs firmer, his jaws tight.

“Ah,” I gasp.

The tingles erupt and my pussy starts to pulse and sear and then my vision goes blurry as I stare through pleasure-filled eyes up at him, an *O* of surprise on my lips, an *O* that seems to drive him even crazier.

The orgasm passes quickly, a jolt of surprise euphoria and then it’s over.

I laugh, feeling like a new door inside myself has been opened, a door I never even knew was locked.

“That was crazy,” I whisper.

“It’s just the start,” he smirks. “I plan on exploring every inch of you, Erin. Every fucking *molecule*. By the time I’m done with you, I’ll know you inside and out.”

“But won’t you get bored?” I whisper.

He throws his head back and laughs huskily, fully.

I wonder if the bizarre, warm intoxicated feeling that has possessed me after our sex has also taken hold of him.

“Bored?” he says, looking at me indulgently. “I truly believe it would be impossible to get bored of you, Erin. You’re one of a kind. And I count myself the luckiest man in the world that I found you.”

I move closer to him, an irrepressible smile on my face, no longer a virgin.

And I couldn’t have lost it to a better man.

“Erik, I ...”

“Yes?” he prompts, when I trail off.

I want to be with you forever. I want to be your wife.

“I’m so happy we met.”

“Me too, Erin,” he whispers, fingers tickling my neck pleasantly. “Though *glad* doesn’t quite cut it. It’s more that I feel like my life was a ship. It was sailing along steadily enough. There were waves, of course, slight changes in my course. But nothing this ... this *momentous*, I suppose you could say.”

“And now?” I murmur. “What is it now, Erik?”

For the first time, I note a glimmer of shyness in him. Just a moment. He looks at the sky through the open air ceiling, and again I get that feeling that we’re in our own private floating world.

“Now,” he says, looking at me again, like he’s made up his mind. “Now our lives are a shooting star, Erin.”

CHAPTER NINE

E_{rik}

A few days later, I sit in the garden with Kat and Bullet sitting next to the fountain. Kat has her hand draped over his shoulders, a toothy grin on her face as she smiles in a freeze frame at Erin, who's peering professionally at her easel as she lovingly strokes her paintbrush across it.

I feel something warm and airy filling my chest, something I have never felt before.

It's new, entirely brand new. This was something I didn't expect when I heard her voice and knew she was mine and mine alone. I knew that I was going to claim her.

I knew that she was going to bear my children.

But this feeling, this all encompassing *need*, this ...

I don't even know what it is. It fills me from the tips of my fingers to the tips of my toes.

I'm a professional, of course. I've gone into the city these past few days for work as normal. But I often find my mind

straying back to Erin, to my desire to spend time with her, *all* the damn time.

“Uncle,” Kat says, trying her best to keep her lips shut as she speaks, a ventriloquist act that causes Erin to turn to me with a smile.

Do you think our daughter is going to be as cute as her? her look asks.

I smirk, near-smile, feeling more open and carefree than I have since I was a child myself.

“Are we doing a good job, uncle?”

“An excellent job, Kateyln,” I say.

“And Bullet.”

I chuckle. “Of course. And Bullet. Good boy.”

Erin looks at me a moment longer, bright in the morning sun. She’s wearing a polkadot dress that settles over her like mist, outlining every part of her body clearly, almost turning me into a beast right here.

Her breasts seem fuller these past few days, since I’ve been making ample use of them every single day.

I’ve painted them with my precome, dragging my manhood across them, sucked on her nipples until they’re red and begging for more.

Her crossed thighs look ready for another round, begging to be squeezed and pressed and adored.

Her blonde hair is tied up in a ponytail, screaming at me to fist it, to pull her back towards me as my manhood finds its proper place inside of her.

I think about last night, when she let me tie her to my bed with my silk ties, her ankles and her wrists so that she was splayed on her belly for me.

She looked so perfect as I stalked up behind her, my eyes fixated on the pink preciousness of her hole, her glistening, soaking wet hole, and when I plunged into her she started to shift back despite her bindings, moaning and then screaming for more.

She was reluctant to scream at first, but then I had my bedroom soundproofed, and now her screams ring out like the most beautiful music I have ever heard.

I pounded her into that bed, my belly crushing into those gorgeous round ass cheeks, fleshy perfection made real. And as I pounded into her I felt my whole body honing down to the tip of my cock, an electric buzzing right at the end of my shaft.

I started to fuck her so hard I could hear the wet squelching of her pussy, a gorgeous sound, and then she started to scream and I could feel her coming, the tell-tell way her pussy was twitching for me.

And then, fucking *hell*, I looked down and saw that her frothy whiteness was sliding up my cock and into her ass cheeks, painting them in her own desire.

I slid my hand over her ass and then my thumb slid close to her forbidden hole, her tight, come slick hole.

"Can I?" I groaned, as I felt myself almost exploding. "Let me finger your tight ass."

"Do it, baby," she cried. "Oh, God, finger it hard, finger it and then come inside me."

Her confidence has flown high these past few days, as our sexual exploration has surged forward like the shooting star of our closeness.

My mind a haze of lust, I slid my thumb into her asshole, just a little bit, using the wetness of her juices.

Seeing that puckered hole part for me, her ass cheeks quivering at the sensation, was enough to send the come shooting like fucking lava up my hard length.

I smashed my cock into her, giving her no mercy, but my queen didn't need any mercy.

She took every thrust, arching her back, pushing back against me.

My Bratva queen.

She took everything I had to give and gasped for me.

After, I untied her and we showered together, and I kissed every single part of her under the flaming water, and then as the water cascaded down her naked body I fell to my knees and sucked on her sensitive clit.

I sucked like I was worshipping her pussy, because I was.

It was - *is* - my altar, my home.

Mine.

Now, in the garden, I stand up and walk over to the oak bar, taking a deep breath to calm myself.

It's a bad idea to allow my mind to stray there in the light of day, especially with my niece and my dog and my woman busy with her painting right in front of me.

I pour myself a soda and take a deep breath, and then turn around, sipping it.

Erin gives me a look, as if asking if I'm okay.

I nod.

She smiles.

And life gets that just little bit brighter.

Later, though, shit gets dark.

Really dark.

That night, I fall asleep like a man falling into a grave, my body content and relaxed after all the sex, and my mind just the same from the closeness.

When I wake, it's in the middle of the night and the house is silent except for the creaking and whining it makes under the subtle breeze.

I look over to Erin's side of the bed - it's amazing how it's become that, *her* side - and a prickly, uneasy sensation moves over me when I see that she's not there.

No sound from the ensuite.

She could be in her room.

She could be somewhere else in the house.

She could be with Kat.

I check them all, and no, no, no.

I search the house.

I go to the surveillance room and, trying not to panic, I scan the last hour of the feed.

My mouth falls open when I watch her creep out of the bedroom and down the hallway, out of the front door and toward the side gate the delivery drivers use.

I watch as she stares down at my guard, my goddamn guard, knocked out and lying sideways from where the tranquilizer dart hit him in the throat.

She walks down the road and stops at the edge, and then a van pulls up.

Michael Jenkins, her stalker, the Irish mob's whipping boy, steps out.

For a ridiculous moment I wonder if she's betrayed me, if Erin has gone behind my back to work with the mob, if perhaps her very presence here was a trick all along.

But then I see her waving her hands, arguing, her gesticulations getting wilder and broader as she and Michael debate something near the back of the van.

I see them, but she doesn't.

Her back is turned.

Two men in hoods and dressed head to toe in black sneak up behind her, one of them holding handcuffs that glint in the night, and the other holding a black bag.

My hands clench into fists and my heart starts to hammer in my chest as I stare, feeling powerless. For the first time in years, I feel so fucking powerless.

They grab her, cuff her hands, shove the black bag over her head.

They throw her into the back of the van and slam the door.

The van drives away.

The road is empty.

My breath comes raggedly.

They've taken my queen.

CHAPTER TEN

E_{rin}

He lifts the black bag and I blink, adjusting to the light, already cursing myself for being the biggest fricking idiot in the universe.

“We have Kat. If you don’t get out here right now, we’re going to slit her throat. If you stop to do anything, anything at all, we’ll slit her throat. We have access to that Russian prick’s security feed and we’ll know if you’ve delayed. You have two minutes. We are at the side entrance, Erin, the delivery entrance. I want to trade you for her. It’s the way it always should’ve been. Me and you together.”

I was in my bedroom when it happened, collecting the charger for my electronic toothbrush, and I began to shake as I thought about Michael with his hands on precious, innocent Kat.

Then I heard her voice, whimpering.

“Help me, Erin. Help me.”

Something in me broke and I just sprinted from the house in my pajama bottoms and my hoodie, only stopping to pull on some sneakers, terrified that even that small gesture would warp whatever twisted code this monster had created in his mind.

I blink again and stare around what seems to be a half-wrecked boatyard.

The cold air of the late evening bites at me, everything is dark. The lights of the city blink in the background and moonlight bounces off the loudly sloshing sea.

My hands are secured behind me with what feels like duct tape, and right away my street instincts kick in. I start tugging at it as subtly as I can, wondering if there's any give.

Gnawing, gnawing, like a rat caught in a maze.

Faceless men stare from the darkness, many of them holding guns, and the jagged silhouettes of broken boats lay on the shattered dockyard. I wondered what happened here, what mafia related war took place to render it so riddled with detritus.

Michael Jenkins steps back with the bag in his hand, a victorious grin on his face. He's dressed all in black, like everybody else, but his hood is pulled down to reveal his freckled face and his mop of red hair, longer than the last time I saw him, unruly.

My own personal stalker, my own bogeyman.

Lucky me.

"You don't have Kat," I say simply.

"Nope," he laughs.

“Then how ...”

“Did we fake her voice?”

I nod.

He titters in a childlike way, that uneasy, insinuating way that made my skin crawl even back at camp. It was one of the things that first made me uncomfortable about him, the delight he took in the seemingly most insignificant of things.

In Kat, the all-encompassing enthusiasm is endearing.

In Michael, with his beady eyes and his lascivious grin, it makes me want to run, run as fast as I can, far, far away.

Which I'd done.

I had run. To the streets.

And yet here I was.

“There are computer programs that can do that these days,” he says, clearly pleased with himself. “It was easy.”

“At least you didn't kill Erik's guard,” I mutter.

He rolls his eyes. “I wanted to, hot stuff, believe me. But I was *advised* that it would be a bad idea. It would make old Erik more likely to get his pantyhose in a twist.”

“Why, Michael?” I spit, voice trembling with anger. “Why can't you just leave me alone? You're just some guy, some *freak* from camp who tried to perv on me when I was seventeen years old. It doesn't make any sense.”

“We're bonded together, Erin,” he whispers, creeping close to me, moving like a poor imitation of a big cat. “Don't you understand? We belong together. Our bond was made in death. You don't belong with that man, that Russian pretentious ass. You belong with me. It's your destiny.”

I shiver as more creepy crawlies dance sickeningly over my skin, making me want to puke, to scream.

“You’re delusional,” I whisper, fear pricking me despite my desire to stay strong. “You’re sick in the head, Michael. To go to a camp as a counsellor and just randomly pick a girl – a *child* – and start trying to make her take pictures ... don’t you understand how wrong that is?”

He laughs maniacally, dancing back, skipping over to one of his men in the darkness and exchanging a few whispered words. My body stiffens as I imagine him returning with a gun, placing the cold barrel against my head and ...

Boom.

But instead he walks back over with a cell phone in his hand, the screen a rectangle of brightness in the dark of the dock.

“Random,” he mutters, bringing the phone close to me, the light stinging my eyes after so much darkness. “Is that really what you think you were, Erin? We were meant for each other.”

I turn my face aside, refusing to look at the photo, the horror of it.

I caught a glimpse.

I don’t want any more.

My heartbeat thuds and I think of Erik, my man, and Kat, who already feels like family to me. I think of Bullet and his big pink smile and I just wish this man would collapse and die, just die right here, just leave me the hell alone.

I work at the duct tape, my wrists burning with the pressure, my arms aching under the strain.

“I’ve found a man,” I spit. “And he’s ten, fifteen—no, a thousand times the man you are, Michael. You have problems. You clearly have something wrong with you. And I’m sorry, I really am. I’m sorry that something’s messed up in your head. But you’re a fucking monster, too, so I can’t be that sorry. Just leave me alone. Let me be happy. Erik. I’ve chosen Erik. Forever.”

I’m babbling now, the photo slicing into my head like a knife, making it hard to think.

“Look, Erin,” Michael says, all humor gone from his voice, jagged and cold. “Look or I swear to God I’ll do nasty things to you right here in front of the men. And when I’m done, you ungrateful slut, I’ll let them have a go.”

I shiver and something in me screams to spit at him.

But another part, the part involved in self-preservation, tells me that that would be the worst thing I could do in this situation.

“Look, Erin,” he growls. “Now.”

“N-no,” I whimper.

“Three ...”

“Please.”

“Two ...”

“Michael, stop. Stop.”

“You’re not going to like what happens when I get to one.”

I feel my head turning, though it doesn’t seem as if I’m the one guiding the motion.

I stare at the picture of my parents sitting in a crack den. I recognize them from the one picture I’ve seen before, two

emaciated ghoul looking people, their cheeks gaunt, surrounded by filth. My father is aiming his middle finger at the camera and my mother is laughing, showing her drug ruined teeth.

If it weren't for the graffiti on the walls and the needles visible on the grimy floor, this might be a funny, endearing photo.

But it just breaks my heart.

"Do you know who took this, Erin?" Michael whispers.

"No," I snap, blinking back tears. "Of course I fucking don't. You know I don't. How would I? I've never seen it before."

"Ooh, feisty," he titters. "I hope you're the same in the bedroom, you whore. But humor me, Erin. Do you know who took this photo?"

"I've already told you I don't."

He sighs, almost sadly, and pockets the phone. "It was my dad," he says. "My dad took that picture. You see, Erin, my dad and your dad had an arrangement. He loaned your mom out to people, and my old man, unfortunately, was one of them. Do you know what your whore of a mother did, Erin? She infected my dad with an STI and that's what killed him. So do you see? You owe me. Your mother killed my fucking father."

I reel back in the chair as much as I can, feeling the back legs tip, forcing me to sit forward unless I want to land on my hands.

There's a quiet *tear* sound as I feel the duct tape give, just a little.

Or do I imagine the sound?

I keep struggling, hoping they don't notice, hoping it's too dark.

"I found you at that camp on purpose," he goes on. "I knew that we'd have a connection. I mean, shit, if your mom's disgusting druggie hole was good enough for my old man, then what about your young little thing?"

"You're sick," I whisper. "You're evil."

"Maybe," he says, nodding. "Yeah, you might have a point there. But do you know what, Erin? I don't care anymore. Boss."

Boss?

"You can take her now," he says. "Thanks for letting me do this. But I'm done with her."

Out of the shadows, a man emerges, at least eighty years old with a cigar dangling out of his mouth. He wears slacks and has a silver tooth that winks light as he munches on the cigar, the smoking curling.

"This is the girl Erik Godunov has chosen to enter his household, to take care of his niece? Look at her. I thought she'd be more ... well, *more*."

I hold my head up high, fighting the warring emotions that attack me in an onslaught as I try to make sense of what's happening.

Michael has been stalking me for years, then, if he knew I was going to camp. My skin writhes with sickening discomfort.

I fight the urge to scream.

The man takes a big puff of his cigar and then takes another step forward.

“Sebastian Crawford, sweetheart,” he says. “And it seems you’re my prize. I’m going to use you to hit that Russian fuck where it hurts. Then he’ll finally respect the Irish ...”

He coughs and looks around, a confused tremor streaking across his features, as several small canisters bounce along the ground – *ting, ting, ting* – and then start to hiss and spew smoke out of their ends.

Smoke fills the air.

It makes the darkness even deeper, obstructing our vision.

Everybody starts to yell, to demand to know what’s going on.

I keep worrying at the duct tape, stunned by my own strength, strength I never knew I had even on the streets.

After straining for several seconds – the smoke so ubiquitous, I can’t even see a foot in front of me – I feel a tearing sensation. At first, I think it’s in my wrist, the digging pain is so invasive, but then my hands come free.

I leap up.

I run.

I don’t know where I run.

Panic chases me and in the swirling monolith of the smoke, amidst the raised voices and the general panic, I think about my father, passing my mom around like she was some sort of toy. And I hate him. I hate him.

I want to build a new family.

With Erik.

With my man.

But will I get out of here alive?

Or is this twisted boat graveyard going to become my resting place, too?

I push through a door, not even sure how I got here, running into what seems to be a disused warehouse.

And then somebody's arms are wrapping around me, pulling me close, and their grip is getting tighter as I try to thrash and wriggle out of their steely embrace.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

E_{rik}

I squeeze her close to me.

My queen.

The woman I feared I'd never see again. That fear showed me something vital about myself. No, not about me, but about her. Erin is the best woman in the goddamn world, that's what it showed me.

She's unlocked something inside of me, something I had to kill as a child so that I could rise up and become the leader of the Bratva. I can let it go, now, with her.

"Erin," I whisper, hugging her close. "I'm here. It's okay."

"It's you?" she says, her voice disbelieving.

I take her by the shoulders and turn her around, looking deeply into her eyes. I can see the panic there. I can see the haunted look in her eyes. But, beneath all that, there's a strength that triggers pride in my chest, a blooming swelling of it.

“Oh, Erik,” she moans, collapsing against me, choking on a sob as she tells me.

The words tumble out of her.

She tells me about Michael and her parents.

She tells me about the trick with Kat’s voice.

She tells me about getting free, about how sore her wrists are.

I move my hands through her hair and whisper to her, “Everything’s going to be okay. You’re safe now. I have a car waiting. The police are dealing with the Irish.”

“The *police*?”

I nod. “A smart man knows when to use—”

Suddenly, the door at the far end bursts open.

Michael Jenkins and five hooded Irish mobsters walk in, panting and looking around, clearly for an escape. Two of them have their guns out and the others reach for them when they see us.

I whip out my pistol and jump in front of Erin, blocking her with my body, making myself as big and wide as possible.

Michael stops, blinking when he sees us, illumed by a shaft of moonlight coming in through the tattered remains of the warehouse roof. The wind howls and people shout all around us, but this little corner of the mayhem seems somehow private.

“Oh, shit,” he says, grinning. “Look what we got here, lads. Romeo and Juliet being all lovey-dovey, trying to avoid the fight. What’s to stop me from shooting you in the head, Erik?”

I bare my teeth in a wolf's grin and then heft my gun, saying nothing.

"That?" he laughs. "In case it's missed your notice, you're outgunned."

"I could drop three of you before you hit me with a single shot," I snarl. "And if you think one shot's going to end me, you're sorely fucking mistaken, my friend."

He shakes his head, smirking. "Cocky motherfucker."

He stalks closer, his men spreading out behind him, trying to surround me. But they're amateurs. They're coming too close.

They're underestimating me, just as the men in the fighting ring used to in my youth, thinking I was just a teenager, not understanding the savage fury that fueled my every movement.

"Just go, Michael," Erin hisses from behind me.

"Quiet, babe. The men are talking."

"Just *go*," she snaps. "You're a disgusting fucking monster and if you don't leave, I'll kill you. Do you understand? I'll *kill* you."

My pride swells even more, that now, in the face of the man who has haunted her so sadistically, she is still able to summon her flame.

My mind flickers like firelight, filling with all the glory the future's going to bring for us. Our children are going to inherit her spirit. I just know they are.

But first, these men, these fools.

First, this stalker, this so-called bogeyman.

But what Michael doesn't know is he's a little over excited pup and I'm the big bad goddamn *wolf*.

"I think you're coming with us, Erik, my man," Michael says. "You'll make a nice hostage."

"Is that so?" I say, lowering my gun slightly, judging the distance between the men now, my mind performing calculations at a rate too quickly for me to even comprehend.

In the fighting pits, they once sent six men at me at once.

I was smaller then, younger.

I'm a grizzled bear now, ready with experience, and Michael Jenkins has just made a deadly mistake by stepping within reach.

I swipe at him, knocking his pistol from his hand and then leaping forward.

Crack.

My knuckles take him under the eye, breaking the skin, a cut pissing blood under his cheek.

The men swarm me, they try to fire their guns, but I spin around and grab one under the armpit and haul him into the nearest two.

I spring at the others, spinning and catching one with a vicious spinning elbow, his nose busting and erupting in a shower of crimson.

They leap at me and jump for their guns, but they're slow, so fucking slow.

I sprint and shoulder-barge one into the far wall, making him scream as he falls to the ground, clutching onto his shattered arm with his slightly less injured one.

A man grabs me and I spin, catching his throat, lifting him off his feet and tossing him to the side like a rag doll.

Then Michael raises his gun again, a victorious smile on his face, but he's raising it too slowly, too confidently, and I duck under and come up with an uppercut that would knock a tree out of its roots.

His head tips back and he makes a bloody, gurgling noise as he backflips and lands on the floor, gasping.

All around me, as I emerge from the haze of violence, the men are gasping and groaning and trying to sit up.

And failing, because I've worked them over too badly.

I glance at Erin and even more pride moves through me when I see she's collecting all the guns and placing them on the other side of the room, leaving the men unarmed.

My streetwise Bratva queen.

I kneel down and grab Michael by the scruff of his shirt, dragging him to his feet.

"Apologize," I snarl. "Apologize for all the fucked up things you've done to Erin, Michael, do it now or I'm going to do something I might regret with the police about to barge in here any second. *Might* regret, I said. Mark that. Because there's a big part of me that'd enjoy punishing you for what you did to her."

He croaks.

His legs kick and I have to hold him up.

And then he gasps, "Okay, okay. Jesus, Erin, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm a piece of a shit. I'm a loser. I hate myself."

I turn to Erin, an eyebrow cocked.

She nods, letting me know it's enough, she's done with him.

I drop him and walk over to her, taking her hand and leading her toward the door. I navigate the darkness well, feeling her take calming breaths beside me.

Finally I burst out the side of the warehouse and open the door of the sleek, black sedan that's waiting there for us.

She hurries in and I climb in behind her, slamming the door and sitting back, taking a slow breath myself, as the car pulls away.

"You're going to make an amazing mother," I whisper after a moment.

She snuggles close to me. I wrap my arm around her, squeezing her even closer, and then even tighter, as I realize that I could've lost her.

My woman. *Mine*. I could've lost her forever.

In the madness of a job, you don't think like that. Everything is in the moment. Instinct rules.

Now it hits me and I hold her like I'm never going to let go.

"Really?" she whispers. "Because my parents weren't so great, clearly."

"I saw you back there," I say with passion. "You were strong. You were scared, of course you were, but you were brave, too."

She shivers, snuggling closer to me. "Is Kat okay?" she whispers.

"Yes," I assure her. "She was sitting in bed with Bullet when I left her, guarded by eight of my most trusted men."

“And the police, Erik?” she whispers. “I’m still confused about the police.”

“Not everything is what it seems,” I murmur. “For example, most people would expect me, as the leader of the Bratva, to charge in there and slaughter those bastards, like they probably deserve. But that would lead to further fallout, disruption of business, and, more importantly, death. Death for them, yes, but also death for others further down the line. And, Jesus, Erin, and maybe death for *you*.”

“So I use the police sometimes. I work with them. They tolerate me because I donate to them regularly and they know that with me ruling the streets, things will be much, much less violent. I avoid killing at all costs. I pay my way with my legitimate businesses. I don’t allow my ego to rule me, as some of these weaker men do, these pathetic bastards who feel the need to strut around and act tough.”

She looks up at me, tears beading in her eyes, so devastatingly beautiful I can hardly believe she’s real.

“I guess I always had certain assumptions about the Bratva,” she whispers, and then licks her lips as though contemplating what to say next. “But that was before I met you, Erik. That was before I discovered that, despite your job, your position, whatever the heck you want to call it, how really, really *good* you are.”

I smirk and kiss her forehead, closing my eyes and savoring the feel of her, the life making her skin hot.

“Don’t tell anybody,” I joke. “If word got out that Erik Godunov has a heart, it could complicate things.”

“Everybody who matters already knows,” she whispers. “Kat, Bullet.”

“You.”

“Yes.” She smiles. “And me.”

We sit back as the car continues to glide back toward my estate.

When we get home, we climb out. We just can’t stop holding onto each other, my arm wrapped around her shoulder, her hand gripping onto my side as we walk up the steps and into the house. She lays her head against me as I lead her upstairs, toward Kat’s room.

We share a look as we hear Bullet on the other side, panting, desperate to get out when he scents us.

“*Bullet*,” Kat is saying. “*Good* boy.”

“All good, boss?” Igor asks.

I nod shortly. “Take the men and surround the estate. Give us some privacy.”

“Of course.”

“Wow,” Erin teases when Igor and the men have gone. “You can really turn on the stern routine, huh?”

I nudge her playfully, still amazed that I’ve found somebody I feel comfortable nudging playfully.

“I thought you knew that already,” I chuckle. “In the bedroom, Erin, you turn me *very* stern.”

She giggles and jabs me back. “Come on. Bullet sounds like he’s going crazy in there.”

“Katelyn,” I say, knocking on the door. “Open up. It’s us.”

“Is Erin there?” she beams.

“Erin is,” Erin says, smiling.

“Oh, yay, good,” she says. “I was so scared. Come on, boy, lemme open the door.”

A moment later, the door swings open and Kat and Bullet run at us, both of them with big grins on their faces. I kneel down and wrap my arms around Bullet as Kat throws herself at Erin, tears streaking down her face as she struggles to get the words out.

“I was so scared and I kept saying it would be okay, to myself I kept saying that, but then I thought if it’s not, oh, Erin. Are you still my best friend? I’m sorry that something bad happened to you. Where did you go? I’m so happy you’re home. I love you, Erin. I really love you.”

Erin blinks and glistening tears flow down her cheeks as she hugs my niece to her chest, looking at me over her head, smiling despite the tears.

“I love you, too, little lady,” Erin whispers.

And I love you, my mind growls, staring at my queen, looking so maternal as she lets my niece sob into her chest.

I love you more than life itself.

But something blocks the words, some instinctual trepidation.

Instead I move closer to them, and enfold them all – Bullet, Erin, Kat – in my arms, hugging them close.

For the first time since they took Erin, I let out a sigh of relief.

I’m home.

She’s safe.

And tomorrow is a new day, an important day.

Perhaps the most important of our lives.

CHAPTER TWELVE

E_{rin}

“Where are we going?” I ask, looking across the Lamborghini to Erik sitting in the driver’s seat, confidently handling the car, smirking over at me as he shifts gears.

“That would be telling, wouldn’t it?”

“Why do I feel like you’re playing a game, Erik Godunov?”

He chuckles and I let a smile spread across my lips, knowing he’s not going to tell me. We’re driving down the highway towards the city, and if somebody told me in this moment that all the craziness only happened last night, I wouldn’t believe them.

We spent what felt like forever hugging each other, all four of us, and then afterward Erik and I sank into bed together and just lay there for a while, our bodies pressed closed.

But then the lust took over, unbelievably considering what had happened, considering that I still smelt of smoke.

The lust started and we couldn’t stop it.

“Erik, I smell.”

“I don’t mind.”

“I do.”

He smirked, then, and took me by the hand and led me into the marble ensuite. We stood under the waterfall shower and he lathered the shower gel into my body, pressing my breasts together, getting them soapy before rinsing them off.

We devoured each other, like animals, like people who’d been underwater for too long and finally broke the surface and took that first breath of air.

Now, I reach across the car and stroke my hand along his face, savoring the feel of his jawline, completely clean shaven this morning.

When I woke up and found him standing naked in the bathroom, shaving as he looked into the mirror, his back a rippled canvas and the light making shadows play on the ridges in his muscles, I asked, “Why are you shaving? Is it a special occasion?”

I intended it as a joke, but he glanced at me, shaving cream clinging to his cheek. And his icy blue eyes sparkled as he turned back to the mirror, smirking and dragging the razor down his jaw with the steady hand of a surgeon.

“Maybe,” he said, wiping the straight-razor on the cloth at his side and then dipping it in the water. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

I was nervous about leaving Kat alone this morning, but then I had to remind myself that she’d never been in any danger to begin with. It had all been a messed up trick. Worse than that, the only danger last night had come from

my actions, from the way I'd just rushed out there. That's a lesson I'll only have to learn once.

I turn back to the road, letting my eyes fall closed, thinking about Kat and Bullet back there at the house, safe with the guards.

Erik has promised that we'll be back before dinner – it's midday now – and that's good enough for me.

I'm stunned by how much I miss Kat, but then not really, not as shocked as I probably should be.

Just like with Erik, it *feels* right.

"You have to go, silly," she told me this morning, pouting at me in a very grownup way. "Uncle Erik has a surprise for you."

"Kat," I said, giving her side a tickle as she lay in bed. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

She wriggled away, giggling. "Nuh uh. It's a secret."

She would say no more and then, when I emerged from her room, Erik was dressed as he is now. He's wearing his sleekest grey suit with silver cufflinks, his hair swept to the side, his shoes polished and shiny, his body as muscular and beautifully intimidating as it always is, *hulking* in the suit jacket.

"Down, girl," Erik jokes from the driver's seat.

"Hey," I say, giving him a pout that would make Kat proud. "Who said I was thinking anything?"

"You don't need to," he smirks, guiding the wheel slowly, effortlessly. "You're wriggling your legs together in that way you have. I know what you want. But you've got to be patient."

“That’s not fair.”

His smirk widens.

“Oh, I think it’ll be worth the wait.”

Then his expression darkens and he swallows audibly.

“At least, I hope so.”

My curiosity flares.

Erik’s hands guide me as I stare into the blankness of the blindfold, my heart hammering in my chest, but not in fear, not like last night.

Excitement bounces around inside me and, somehow, I feel myself letting go of Michael’s revelation, letting go of the past. Erik told me that Michael is going to be in prison for a long, long time, and if he ever tries to hurt me again, he’ll take whatever measures he must to protect me, to protect our family.

I trust him.

I love him.

I feel a light wind pricking my face, and then Erik slides one hand around my waist and hugs me close to him, and with the other he peels off the blindfold.

I blink in the sunlight, staring at the building, my chest doing a dance of elation and shock and a dozen emotions in between.

We’re standing in an enclosed courtyard surrounded by high trees that frame and distort the sunlight.

There's a large, flowery garden and, beyond that, a squat redbrick building that looks so adorable I could weep. The door is baby blue and there's a sign above the door that reads, *Erin Godunov's Art Studio*.

I gasp, bringing my hands to my mouth.

"This is ... mine?" I whisper in disbelief.

"If you want it," Erik says, hugging me closer to him, his torso laid flat against my back, warm and comforting. "I know that painting takes you here and there, but it works as a base camp, I think?"

"Works," I say, giggling. I spin on him, looping my arms over his shoulders and standing on his tiptoes. "It's amazing. It's the best thing I've ever seen. Thank you, Erik. Thank you so much."

Another woman might tell him no, she won't accept handouts.

Another woman might let pride rule her.

But the thing is, I've lived on the streets. And you take what you can get. I'm not going to shoot myself in the foot for the sake of it.

And I'll work my ass off, hopefully making my mark on the art world.

"But, wait a second," I whisper, our lips close together, brushing in sultry movements. "Isn't the name wrong?"

"Oh?" he says, tilting his head, his lips twitching.

"Is it?"

I turn and walk toward the studio, glancing across the kaleidoscopic garden and looking again at the sign. I wasn't going crazy before.

It definitely says *Erin Godunov*.

“See,” I say, turning back to him.

My hands fly to my mouth.

A gasp escapes between my fingers.

Erik is kneeling down, his hands resting on his knee, his eyes alight like twin wildfires.

“Erin,” he whispers. And then clears his throat, speaking louder. “Erin, I’ve waited far too long to say this. Really, I should’ve said it the second I heard your voice outside Katelyn’s room. I love you.”

I gasp again, walking forward as though I don’t trust my legs to catch me.

“I love you so much,” he growls. “I love you more than I ever realized it was possible to love. My love for you—Jesus, I don’t know how to paint it with words. My love for you is unending, Erin. My love for you is a warm fire after too long spent in the cold. Goddamn, my love for you is *everything*. You’re the best person I’ve ever met.”

“Erik,” I croak, a sob crackling in my throat. “I love you, too. Oh, God, so much. So much.”

Tears slide down my cheeks.

Erik reaches into his jacket and brings out a felt ring box, opening it slowly. Sunlight catches the elegant diamond ring. I feel unsteady, as though I can feel the earth spinning, trying to hurtle me off.

But Erik will keep me here.

With him.

“Erin Woods,” he says. “I never thought I’d find the woman I would claim as mine. But the second I heard your voice, I knew. Something happened inside of me. Something magical, you could say. Erin Woods, will you marry me?”

“Yes,” I squeal, throwing myself at him.

He laughs and catches me, sliding backward and lying down, both of us rolling in the luscious grass, the sounds of the city faraway through the shielding trees.

“Yes, yes, yes,” I yell, finding his lips.

He takes the ring and slides it onto my finger, and then lets the ring box fall and takes my face with both his hands.

The kiss is long and deep and I feel happiness flurrying around inside of me like hummingbirds.

“I never thought I deserved love,” I whisper. “But you make me feel like I do, Erik. You make me feel special.”

“You are special,” Erik says passionately. “And I’m so fucking glad every fool you’ve ever met was too stupid to see it. Because now you’re mine. Forever.”

EPILOGUE

THREE WEEKS LATER

E_{rik}

“And you have to be very careful in the sun, Bullet,” Kat says, standing knee deep in the fountain as Bullet towers beside her.

She leans down into the water and reaches for his paws, massaging them.

“See? Nice and cool. Nice and better. Now let’s get you in some lovely shade and I promise you, you’ll feel like a million dollars. Won’t he, Erin? Won’t he feel like a million dollars?”

“How about a billion?” Erin says, sitting next to me on the wicker furniture, under the shade of the billowing umbrella.

I turn to her in something like wonder, a wave of love washing through me as I take in the sight of her, a feeling of rightness. She’s sitting with her legs crossed in the blessedly thin summer dress, settling over her like mist, her curves, her *Erinness*.

Everything about her is perfection.

Love swells and writhes and explodes and sparkles brightly inside of me.

I'll still be hard, always.

I'll still be the savage fucking beast I need to protect her, my fiancé, and Kat and Bullet and our family.

But I can't deny the love.

She turns to me, a smile on her face, golden hair seeming to shine in the sunlight.

"What are you staring at?" she says.

"Just the most beautiful woman in the world."

"Oh?"

She turns, ostentatiously looking around the garden, as if searching for somebody who could be more devastatingly perfect than her, which is impossible.

But then Bullet lopes out of the fountain, nose lowered as he sniffs the grass for any sign of what Erin's looking for.

"Hey, Bullet," Kat giggles, leaping out and chasing after him, her bare feet making wet prints on the luscious grass.

"Heck," Erin grins. "So I guess that backfired, huh?"

"That's right," I tell her, moving closer, sliding my hand over her shoulder and squeezing her close. "Now you just have to accept that you're it, Erin, you're the most elegant, beautiful, womanly woman alive. And that's just *one* of the reasons I love you."

She glows, and then looks up at me with a shimmer in her eyes.

"What?" I ask.

"I ... I guess you could say I have something to tell you. But first, I don't know—"

She sighs

"What is it?" I whisper, squeezing her shoulder in support.

Kat's giggling becomes musical ambience as she chases Bullet around the garden, Bullet starting to enjoy the game, forgetting that he was supposed to be looking for something so he can just run around the place now.

I lean down, bringing my face close to Erin's so our noses touch and tickle each other.

"You can tell me anything," I assure her.

"I know," she says, giggling lightly at the sensation of our noses. "I've been thinking a lot about my parents. And it's just so horrible, Erik. It's evil. What my dad did to my mom. What they did, having a baby and abandoning it, *it, ha ha*, me."

"I know," I say. "And I'm so sorry, Erin. But I can't say I regret that it happened completely."

"No?"

"No," I whisper. "Because then I never would've found you, my Bratva queen. And I love you more than anything. It hurts, how much I love you. You make me feel like a new man. Or maybe you unlocked something inside of me that I never even knew *needed* unlocking."

"I like that," she says, stroking her fingers along my jaw. "But what if I have their same instincts when it comes to kids, Erik? What if I'm not going to be a good mother?"

My heart starts to stammer in my chest.

I feel tingles dancing over my skin, up my spine, joy trying to blossom in my chest.

I feel *free*, like I could fucking fly.

I sense what she's hinting at.

But I won't steal this moment from her.

"Erin," I say, squeezing her tighter, closer. "I've seen you with Kat. I've seen you with Bullet. I've seen you, just plain seen you, and there's no doubt in my mind that you're going to be an incredible mother. You're caring, you're supportive, you're talented, you'll be an inspiration to them. Not to mention, you've got the perfect build for breastfeeding."

She giggles, shaking her head at me. "I love you."

"I mean it," I say. "You never have to worry about that."

"Well, then," she says, taking a deep breath. "I've got something to tell you."

Click, click, click, that's the sound of our lives falling into place.

Kat and Bullet come walking over, sensing that something momentous is happening.

Erin licks her lips and leans back, readying herself.

"I'm pregnant," she says.

I'm on my feet and punching the air before I realize what's happening, my excitement driving me into overkill, and then I'm sprinting like a madman around the garden. I leap into the fountain and shout at the sky, "Yes, yes, yes."

Bullet lopes around at my feet, grinning, and then I return to Erin. She stands up and meets me halfway and I wrap my

arms around her.

“I take it you’re happy?” she says, a thrill in her voice.

“That’s an understatement,” I say, laughing, full of love and warmth.

“Does that mean I’m going to be an auntie or a nephew?” Kat asks, and then her expression turns puzzled. “No, wait a sec, I messed that up.”

Erin and I laugh.

“It’s cousin, right?” Kat goes on earnestly. “I’ll be a big cousin and always look out for them, right, uncle?”

“Absolutely,” I say, putting one hand around my niece’s shoulder and pulling her towards us to share in the embrace.

I smile so widely my cheeks ache, happiness like I’ve never felt before flowing through me.

Love.

What an incredible thing it is.

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER

E_{rin}

Isabelle lies at my feet in the Moses basket, a pink ribbon in her hair, her chest rising and falling softly as she sleeps contentedly. I've got the lid pulled up, shadowing her from the sun, and we're sitting under the shade of the large tree in the outdoor section of my studio.

As I touch the canvas with the brush, painting my gorgeous daughter, I feel my love for her exploding like fireworks all over again.

I feel it hitting me deep.

A *quivering* of love that jolts through me each moment I look at her.

It's almost hard to paint her, because I'm just so obsessed with staring at her little body, of remembering every single detail about her, painting her in my mind rather than painting her with my brush.

"Life's looking up, little lady," I whisper, quietly so I don't wake her. "That horrible man, Michael, he's gone, bye-bye."

Can you say that, huh? Can you say *bye-bye*?"

That's madness, of course. She's only three months old. She won't be able to talk for a while yet. But despite that, there's something inside of me that expects her to just open her mouth and start talking now.

Childbirth was incredible, but it wasn't like somebody new was coming into the world, oh no.

It was like I was *meeting* little Bella, like I'd been waiting my whole life for her, and now here she was.

It was like being reunited, like a glittering shard of my soul had been returned to me.

"Daddy's doing so well at work, hmm?" I go on.

Erik's legitimate businesses have skyrocketed this year, and I've actually started to have some interest from people in the art world, too. There will be an exhibit next week, simply called *Belle*, all pieces I've painted either of my daughter or that were inspired by her.

Butterflies dance in my belly when I think about all those people staring at my work, but I know that with my family, I can do it.

With my family, I can do anything.

My family.

Any doubts I had about being able to be a better parent than my mom and dad were pushed to the wayside the second I felt her kick inside of me, felt how fragile and dependent she was, how vulnerable.

I knew that I'd never be able to let anything happen to her, I'd never abandon her or mistreat her.

“And hasn’t Kat done well at school this year, hmm? Hasn’t cousin Kat done a great job?”

She’s getting smarter, that girl, losing herself in books for hours on end sometimes. Well, that’s when she and her friends aren’t taking over one of the rooms in the house to host disco parties, or down at the skating rink, once Erik and I sat there, watching her speed around under the neon lights, a grin lighting up her face as her braid danced against her back.

I paint, and lose myself in the painting, and then before I know it my personal guard – a friendly, respectful man named Andrei – tells me that Erik and Kat are on their way.

I put away my things and carry Belle inside, making sure she’s not too hot and then changing her diaper.

Once she’s fresh and changed – and suddenly extremely awake, a curious smile on her face – I hear the tell-tell sound of Bullet nosing at the door.

That was one of the things I was nervous about when we introduced Belle to the family. I wondered if Bullet would be okay around a baby. He could crush her just by sitting down at the wrong time, after all.

But when we introduced him to her, he just padded over and sniffed her, the gentlest I’d ever seen him.

Afterward he sat beside her, immediately guarding her, immediately understanding that she’s part of the family.

And now he’s sniffing the door, not to check if I’m okay, but so that he can check on Belle.

A moment later, Erik pushes it open and Bullet pads over to the basket, leaning down and sniffing Belle’s head, and then

giving her hand a small lick before sitting beside her, a big grin on his face.

I face my man, dressed from work in his steel suit and his salt and pepper hair, his shirt unbuttoned and his tie loosened. He's just come from a big meeting and I can tell by the warmth of his smile and the spark in his azure eyes that it went well.

"Hey, Erin," Kat says, walking in after him, still giving me a shock by how much taller she is than last year.

She's really shot up this summer.

"Uncle Erik did really amazing today. He's going to open a dog rescue shelter. How cool is that?"

"So you got the permits?" I ask, dancing over to him, wrapping my arms around his shoulders and staring with unending love - and searing lust - up at my husband.

"Yes, just about," he smiles.

"Such modesty," I giggle. "I bet there was never any doubt to begin with."

His smile is bright and carefree, the smile of a happily married man, and it makes me want to dance in joy every time I see it, knowing I caused it. Jesus, I'm the woman Erik is happily married to.

Even now, in my baggy paint-flecked shirt and my baggy summer shorts, barefoot from the garden, Erik stares at me with that same heat in his expression.

"And you?" he whispers, moving subtly closer to me, but holding himself back because of the children. "How has your day been, my queen?"

I lean up and kiss his lips, soft and tempting, and then turn away before I lose control.

“Come and see.”

I take them to where I stowed the painting, a room perfect for drying, and then nod at the canvas.

Kat gasps and whispers, “It’s amazing, auntie Erin, it’s really the most amazing one you’ve done yet.”

The painting is just of Belle in her basket, but *just* in a sentence like that doesn’t really make sense, because Belle in her basket means so much, it’s so impactful. I’ve tried to capture that, not just the physical reality of how she looks, but the emotional weight, the flares of joy and hope that thunders through me every time I drink in the sight of my daughter.

I glance at Erik and see that he’s smiling widely, and that his eyes are glimmering, softly, as though he might cry.

But he’s Erik Godunov, and he coughs back the sob.

“It’s incredible,” he whispers, captivated.

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

TEN YEARS LATER

E_{rik}

We walk along the edges of the pond, the magnolia tree shedding its pink leaves and sending them fluttering down into the water.

Erin walks beside me, clutching our four month old, Tyler, to her chest.

Belle is skipping ahead, looking so much like Kat did at her age, a braid dangling down her back as she runs, only this one is sun colored like her mother's.

Vlad walks beside me, my seven year old son with a grin on his face as he looks up at me, shielding his eyes from the sun with his cupped hand.

"Can we throw the ball after lunch, Daddy?" he asks.

"Of course," I smile, reaching down and ruffling his hair.
"You'll have to go easy on me, though."

Jessica, our five and a half year old, is walking ahead with Bullet. I let my eyes roam over my old dog, getting older by the day now, and swallow a lump. He still looks so regal and

loyal, his head held high and his legs moving powerfully, sniffing the air.

Jess puts a hand on his back and turns to me, smiling, proud of herself for taking such good care of Bullet.

I feel something shatter in my heart when I see that pride in her eyes. She's got deep brown hair, the color mine was before it turned silver.

I glance at Erin again, looking so womanly and beautiful in the flowing white pants and the baggy, artistic, bohemian shirt she's wearing.

Ever since her career as an artist took off – *skyrocketed*, is the word – she's developed beautifully as a person.

We've grown together, supporting each other every step of the way, and things seem like they're only set to get brighter.

"Can you believe this is our lives?" Erin whispers, rocking Tyler softly. "Sometimes I feel like we don't deserve it."

"You do," I say. "You deserve the world. But you might be right about me."

"Oh, hush," she says, tossing her flowing golden hair, worn even longer now than she used to. "You're the best man I've ever met."

"Ew," Belle says, laughing. "*Ew, ew, big time, EW.*"

We all laugh as we head around the pond and start back up toward the house. Kat is already waiting for us when we get there, a tall, lean woman of twenty-two years with her long braid now replaced with a tight bun, bobbing as she busies herself with setting the long table around which we're going to eat lunch.

My niece looks up and smiles briefly. I smile back, feeling another pang in my chest. It seems like just yesterday she was a little girl running around the garden with Bullet, and now she's grown so much.

She's at school to become a vet and she's doing a kick-ass job. She's entered the dating world, though she doesn't talk to me about how that goes, mostly Erin. And when she does bring somebody home, he better appreciate my niece, my dear Yekaterina's daughter.

Now, we all sit around the table, Erin walking over to the open back door to lovingly place Tyler in his crib.

I watch my wife leaning over, stroking her fingers along his cheek, and even now – *God help me* – even with my children all around me, I can't quiet the voice inside of me that roars at me to take her.

Take her right now, it says, as I stare at her legs in those pants, the fabric rustling against her thick, child bearing thighs, thighs that have carried our children far on hikes and during playtime.

Thighs made to be squeezed, to be bitten, kissed, teased.

She turns and catches my eye, and does the cutest fucking eye roll I've ever seen.

It's an eye roll that says, *Really, Erik Godunov, even here you can't stop thinking about that?*

I give her a stern look back that says, *You better believe it, Mrs. Godunov. Because you're sex on legs and don't think I'll ever let becoming a mother make you forget that. You're mine. And I'll always delight in exploring your gorgeous body.*

She comes and sits next to me, and Vlad says, "Catch, Daddy, after we eat?"

"Nothing could stop me," I say, grinning at him. "I mean it. A rhino could charge in here, and I'd tell him to relax, chill out, I've got to play catch with my son."

"You're silly," Jess giggles. "Daddy, you're funny."

I pull her favorite face, the one where I stick my tongue out and make my eyebrows wiggle. She laughs like crazy, throwing her head back. I look across the table and see that Kat is leaning down to Bullet, scratching him behind the ear, perhaps watching with her veterinarian eyes.

She looks up and sees me watching her.

"Are we ready to eat, uncle?"

I glance at Erin. "I'm ready if you are," I tell her.

She nods. "Yeah, I'm ready. But only if we're having double cheeseburgers."

My smile splits wide open and I laugh, remembering our first date, the helicopter ride to the restaurant.

I remember how nervous she was back then, and how much she's grown now. The love we share. The family we've built.

I look around the table at the people I love most in this world – and glance down at Bullet, who'll always be my loyal friend – and I smile even wider.

"I love you," I whisper.

Her cheeks blush beautifully. "I love you," she murmurs.

And we eat.

We feast.

Like kings.

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